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Karl Barth's Unnatural Exegesis:
An Inquiry into Barth's Biblical Interpretation
with Special Reference to Christ and Adam

A Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

at the University of Nottingham

in June 2004

by

Matthew S. Howey, MTh

Abstract

This thesis is an enquiry into the problem of Barth's unnatural exegesis. Previous attempts to account for the distinctiveness or strangeness of Barth's exegesis have emphasised its theological character or its context in Church dogmatic tradition. This thesis judges this approach inadequate; in place of theological or dogmatic principles, this thesis searches for a basic hermeneutical principle which will render Barth's exegesis intelligible and constructive.

It is argued that this basic hermeneutical principle is that human subjectivity is predetermined by trans-individual structures of sin, self-deception and self-interest. This means that apparently impartial or spontaneous perceptions or judgements are predetermined by deep structures of sin concealed from our awareness. Barth's theology is intended to expound what it means to speak of salvation through Christ in view of this trans-individual, trans-subjective nature of sin. Barth's basic hermeneutical principle is constructively compared with R.Niebuhr's concept of corporate self-deception, and with the thought of H.-G.Gadamer, who recognised that human subjectivity is predetermined by structures which transcend immediate awareness.

In consequence, Barth held that apparently impartial or critical interpretations of Scripture serve to reinforce hidden structures of culturally ingrained forms of sinful self-interest. This is illustrated by means of a case study of Christ and Adam which represents Barth's mature interpretation of Romans 5. It is demonstrated that Barth's concern was with how interpretations of Romans 5 were covertly determined by the corporate self-deception of the West in the context of the Cold War and western anti-communism.

Finally, it is argued that Barth's theology and scriptural interpretation were closely grounded in his early political involvement and in his reaction to the outbreak of the First World War.

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Chapter One - Introduction

The occasion for this thesis

Ever since I first became interested in Karl Barth as a theologian, I have been struck by the profoundly unnatural character of so much of his scriptural exegesis. It has often seemed to me that his exegesis must be an acute embarrassment for his supporters on the one hand, and an all too easy target for his critics on the other. The occasion for this thesis, then, is to investigate with as much clarity and honesty as possible the problem of Barth's unnatural exegesis.¹

The unnatural character of Barth's exegesis in itself requires explanation. It is perplexing how a theologian of Barth's stature and cogency can present us with so many tortuous or simply unconvincing instances of biblical exegesis. But there is an even more severe difficulty arising from this problem, which is that Barth consistently claimed that his theology was based specifically on the Bible; and not only that, but he seemed to claim that his theology was derived from the Bible to the exclusion of other channels such as reason, tradition or human experience. If, then, his interpretations of the Bible are so unconvincing, what does this mean for a theology which claims to be so specifically based on the Bible? It is quite understandable that some have used the untenability of Barth's exegesis to demonstrate the sheer impossibility of basing theology so exclusively on the Bible.²

Indeed, when faced with the difficulties of defending Barth's exegesis in detail, it has struck me more and more that here we seem to have an intractable difficulty. No 'fundamentalist' harmonisation, no mediaeval allegorising, no Rabbinic midrash seems to present a more severe problem than the more bewildering examples of Barth's exegesis.

¹ I would agree wholeheartedly with the comment of John Bowden when he writes: ' "Unnatural" is in fact an adjective which comes constantly to mind as one reads Barth's interpretation...[H]e is, when he is not being selective, forced to great lengths in dealing with some of [Scripture's] less rewarding passages in an attempt to extract the "meaning".' (Karl Barth (London: SCM Press, 1971), p 115.)

² This is the principal argument of James Barr's book *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), and is also the argument of John Bowden in the aforementioned book *Karl Barth*.

Because of this, I have been especially interested in seeing how those who have studied Barth's scriptural interpretation have responded, whether directly or indirectly, to the problem that it seems more or less impossible to agree with or accept the detailed conclusions of his exegesis.

I would begin with the general comment of the 'Yale school' writer Mary Kathleen Cunningham. Her comment is that previous studies of Barth's scriptural interpretation and exegesis have focused almost exclusively on the general hermeneutical statements to be found in his writings. Or, to put it another way, most studies have focused on Barth's more theoretical statements and have ignored the issue of Barth's actual exegetical practice.³ This is relevant to my own concern, for I would say that it is understandable,

³ Mary Kathleen Cunningham, *What is Theological Exegesis? Interpretation and Use of Scripture in Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1995). 'Previous treatments of this issue have tended to focus on Barth's hermeneutical remarks, with appeals to his exegesis serving only as illustration. This essay, by following the reverse procedure of subordinating attention to his hermeneutical remarks to a careful analysis of his exegetical practice, attempts to shed new light on a topic that has long since been the source of controversy among Barth interpreters.' (p 13.) In an endnote, after a list of previous studies of Barth's exegesis, Cunningham comments: 'The significant feature of all these works is their primary focus on Barth's more theoretical hermeneutical remarks rather than on his actual exegetical practice.' (p 16, n.3.) (In her list of the earlier studies of Barth's exegesis Cunningham lists the following: J.M.Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology: Volume One* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1968); R.Smend, 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung' in E.Busch (ed.), *Parrhesia: Karl Barth zum achtzigsten Geburtstag*, (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1966), pp 215-37; E.Jüngel, 'Theology as Metacriticism' in *Karl Barth: a Theological Legacy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp 70-82; M.Wallace, 'Karl Barth's Hermeneutic: A Way beyond the Impasse', *Journal of Religion* 68 (1988), pp 396-410; M.Wallace, *The Second Naïvete: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990); B.McCormack, 'Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament' in Burrows/Rorem (ed.), *Biblical Hermeneutic in Historical Perspective: Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froehlich on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); G.Eichholz, 'Der Ansatz Karl Barths in der Hermeneutik' in Rudolf Frey et al. (ed.), *Antwort: Karl Barth zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1956), pp 52-68; Lindemann, *Karl Barth und die kritische Schriftauslegung* (Hamburg-Bergstedt, 1973); F.-W.Marquardt, 'Exegese und Dogmatik in Karl Barths Theologie' in *Registerband to Die Kirchliche Dogmatik of Karl Barth* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1970), pp 651-76. Some of these I will be looking at in more detail in the course of my thesis; for the moment I will simply endorse Cunningham's concern that these writers appear to show little interest in the details of Barth's exegesis.)

given the problems associated with the details of Barth's exegesis, that inquiries into his exegesis have focused on his apparently more fruitful and illuminating general statements. And yet, there is clearly something unsatisfactory about this. For if Barth's theoretical statements about scriptural interpretation or exegesis are valid and illuminating, one would surely expect this to be borne out in the way he applies these general principles in practice and in detail. Hence the problematic nature of Barth's exegetical practice should surely become the object of careful investigation. And so, when writers such as Mary Cunningham - and also, from the same school, Paul McGlasson⁴ - call for attention to the actual details of Barth's exegesis, this is surely a positive sign.

And yet, in the cases of both Cunningham and McGlasson, what strikes me is that they do not turn to the details of Barth's exegesis for the reason which concerns me. As indicated, my concern is that a focus on the general, theoretical statements fails to come to grips with the severe difficulties of Barth's actual exegetical practice; but it is clear that this is not the principal concern of either writer.

For it appears to me that they do not ask the straightforward question of whether we can seriously accept the details of Barth's exegesis, or how to respond to the problem that, on the whole, we find ourselves simply unable to accept them; and indeed, on the occasions when we can accept at least some of Barth's conclusions, this seems to be more due to fortuitous coincidence than to any broader or more profound methodological affinity. It seems to me that McGlasson and Cunningham do not take account of this problem any more than do the previous studies of Barth's exegesis which focus on his general or theoretical statements.

Indeed, it appears to me that these writers (McGlasson and Cunningham) are far from committing themselves to the details of Barth's exegesis; nor do they reflect on whether

⁴ P.McGlasson, *Jesus and Judas: Biblical Exegesis in Barth* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1991), p 2: 'The fact is, the best way to come to grips with Barth's possible contribution to contemporary theological hermeneutics is to focus on his actual biblical exegesis, rather than [on] the less clear contours of his few hermeneutical statements. And that is the aim of the present work. I have not, however, attempted to convert Barth's exegesis into a hermeneutical system. That is, I have attempted an analysis of the biblical exegesis as exegesis and not as the embodiment or manifestation of an underlying hermeneutic.'

and to what extent we could affirm the details as correct. Rather, just as much as the other writers whom they criticise, they also are concerned to discover general hermeneutical or theoretical insights in Barth's writings. The real difference is that they believe, rightly or wrongly, that they can find general hermeneutical principles embodied in Barth's actual exegetical practice which are other than those stated by Barth himself in his own explicit hermeneutical or theoretical statements. This rightly invites the criticism of Bruce McCormack, who remarks that it would surely make more sense to take our orientation from Barth's own explicit statements of his hermeneutical principles.⁵

Now, a principal question which occupies McGlasson and Cunningham is whether and to what extent Barth should be understood as reading Scripture as a kind of realistic narrative. In this, they are taking their orientation from earlier writers of the 'Yale school', especially Hans Frei,⁶ David Kelsey⁷ and David Ford.⁸ This vision of Barth's exegesis (i.e. as a narrative reading of Scripture) is certainly not adopted uncritically by either Cunningham or McGlasson; in particular, I think the main purpose of McGlasson's thesis is to argue that the 'narrative' approach to Barth's exegesis is one-sided, and needs to be complemented with an acknowledgement of the rôle of conceptual analysis.⁹

⁵ 'The so-called "Yale School", reacting against the almost exclusive concentration of "liberals" on Barth's theoretical statements on hermeneutics, looked almost completely away from such statements in order to focus attention upon Barth's actual exegesis of Scriptural passages. In defense of this procedure, it was frequently pointed out that Barth himself had said that the proper order was first exegesis and then hermeneutics (as an a posteriori reflection on a prior engagement with texts). But such a defense fails to convince. Once Barth has done the work of reflecting on the hermeneutics implicit in his exegetical procedures, ought we not to take such theoretical statements seriously? We might wish to repeat the experiment, passing through his exegesis to his "theory" to see if the "theory" is justified by his practice. But surely, that would still require close attention to the "theory" as well?' (This passage is found in McCormack's introduction to Richard Burnett's *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001), p vii.)

⁶ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974), pp vii-viii.

⁷ D.Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1975), pp 39f.

⁸ D.F.Ford, *Barth and God's Story: Biblical Narrative and Theological Method of Karl Barth in the Church Dogmatics* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Peter Lang, 1981); D.F.Ford, 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible' in S.W.Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp 55-87.

⁹ Jesus and Judas, pp 8-9; p 133.

However, all such questions about the general pattern of Barth's exegesis tend, as I have indicated, to lead away from the question of the unnatural character of the actual details; and so I will not consider this line of enquiry any further at this point. But there is an area in which I believe McGlasson and Cunningham come closer to my own concern, namely where they consider the rôle of theological commitment in Barth's exegesis. I think I can say, at least provisionally, that the main reason why Barth's exegesis comes across as so unnatural is because so often it seems to be a statement of his own dogmatic position rather than an attempt to establish the meaning of the text itself. And so, when Cunningham and McGlasson raise the question of the rôle of theological commitment, this is where I think they come closest to the issue which I am seeking to address in this thesis.

Taking Cunningham's work first: if I understand her correctly, she appears to conclude that Barth's exegesis differs from contemporary critical exegesis because it incorporates certain theological commitments which are absent from the more detached or technical approach of standard exegetical scholars. In her analysis of Barth's exegesis of the prologue of John, she is able to indicate a certain amount of overlap between Barth and standard critical exegesis; however, her analysis only serves to show that Barth does not share underlying methodological principles with these scholars, because he assumes a prior theological commitment which is not assumed by the 'technical' scholars - specifically that Scripture is meant to be read as a unified witness to its 'true object' which is Jesus Christ.¹⁰

The obvious question is how Cunningham can claim to discover a specific theological commitment or dogmatic principle underlying Barth's exegesis, without dealing with the problem that this suggests that Barth's exegesis has been predetermined, and hence distorted, by prior dogmatic decisions. In fact, Cunningham clearly believes that she can place Barth's approach in a positive light, by claiming that his method of incorporating theological commitment into his exegetical practice enables him to serve more effectively the faith and preaching of the church - more effectively, that is, than is the case in normal

¹⁰ What is Theological Exegesis?, p 75; p 83.

critical exegesis which does not incorporate any such faith commitment.¹¹ In saying this, Cunningham seems to be dependent on G.Hunsinger, also of the ‘Yale school’, who makes an almost identical point in his work on Barth.¹²

Hunsinger and Cunningham are undoubtedly correct when they draw attention to the vital significance of the close interrelation of dogmatic and exegetical concerns in Barth’s exegesis. It is undeniable that in modern times there has developed in theology a conscious distinction between the question of theological truth on the one hand and exegesis or the historical task of determining the meaning of the biblical text on the other.¹³ Arguably the principal reason why Barth’s exegesis seems so unnatural to our critical consciousness is because he appears to go back behind this development and

¹¹ See *What is Theological Exegesis?*, p 78: ‘The result of this tight interweaving of dogmatic interest and biblical interpretation is a kind of theological exegesis that elicits the opprobrium of technical scholars while offering fresh and captivating insights into the Christian message that are designed to serve the preaching of the church.’ - and also p 84: ‘...[W]hen the goal of exegesis is to serve the preaching of the church, such a theological approach can, in the hands of a skilled practitioner such as Barth, yield results that are far more captivating and enduring than any merely historical reading might achieve.’ (For my present purposes, we can pass over the problem that not only historical-critical exegesis but also dogmatic/theological considerations often seem remote from the pastoral or preaching situation.)

¹² G.Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p 57: ‘The result, in the hands of a master like Barth, can be a hermeneutic of close textual readings richly informed by doctrinal considerations not immediately suggested by the text itself but rather by a deepened appreciation for the larger dogmatic or hermeneutical context. Derived from a complex of exegetically based doctrines and doctrinally based exegesis, it is the sort of reading which can be the despair of literalists and technicians while yet enhancing the faith and preaching of the church.’ (It would seem likely that it is Cunningham who is dependent on Hunsinger rather than vice versa, as the relevant remarks do not appear in the earlier version of Cunningham’s essay of 1988, i.e. her PhD dissertation, ‘Karl Barth’s Interpretation and Use of Ephesians 1:4 in his Doctrine of Election: An Essay in the Relation of Scripture and Theology’ (Yale University, 1988).)

¹³ For summaries of this historical development, see W.Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), pp 381-390; G.Ebeling, ‘The Meaning of “Biblical Theology”’ in *Word and Faith* (London: SCM Press, 1963), pp 79-97; W.Wrede, ‘The Tasks and Methods of “New Testament Theology”’ in R.Morgan (ed.), *The Nature of New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp 68-116; H.Räisänen, *Beyond New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1990). Also significant here is F.Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), pp 2f.

attempts to carry out the tasks of dogmatics and exegesis simultaneously. His exegesis can perhaps be read as a protest against such a distinction as it has developed in theology.

However, this is not in itself an adequate defence of Barth's procedure. For we cannot help thinking that there is a good reason why contemporary theological discipline requires a distinction between theological commitments and exegetical study. At issue is the problem of objectivity in establishing the meaning of the text. For if our grasp of the text's meaning is limited or decided in advance by prior theological commitments, then this would seem to be fatal to an objective assessment of the meaning of the text itself. The profoundly counterintuitive character of much of Barth's exegesis seems, if anything, to underline the importance of making the modern distinction between exegesis and dogmatics. It seems to me that for as long as we pass over the difficult question of whether we can actually accept the details of Barth's exegesis (or, more to the point, how we respond to the fact that we cannot accept them), then we are far from providing an adequate response to this problem.¹⁴

It is, I believe, worth taking a slightly closer look at McGlasson's comments on the same type of problem, simply because, as we will see, he seems more aware that there is a problem involved here. Now, McGlasson also identifies the important consideration that Barth seeks to read the Scriptures as a witness to a unified theological theme. But, significantly, he observes that when and where Scripture shows evidence of being too diverse to fit within Barth's scheme, then he (Barth) simply says that the problematic elements of Scripture should be brought into relation to the 'central' content or witness of

¹⁴ cf James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, pp 202-3: 'The countless pages of wearisome, inept and futile exegesis in the *Church Dogmatics*, especially the later volumes, were only a testimony to the fact that the Bible cannot be used theologically when the work of biblical scholarship is brushed aside. Barth offered nothing to that scholarship and in the end achieved nothing for it ... [T]he later years showed that the justification of Barthian theology depended upon philosophical considerations and arguments from the history of ideas, and not upon the Bible.' James Barr has received criticisms for this from F.Watson (*Text and Truth*, especially pp 246-7) and A.C.Thiselton ('Barr on Barth and Natural Theology: A Plea for Hermeneutics in Historical Theology', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), pp 519-528); and yet I think that not only the content but even the tone of Barr's criticisms are perhaps more justified than is allowed by either Watson or Thiselton.

Scripture. At this point McGlasson candidly observes that Barth seems quite untroubled that he is thereby running the risk of imposing an alien principle of his own devising onto the text. He comments as follows on Barth's position that all Scripture must be read as a witness to divine revelation:

For the present, however, I should like to identify a conceptual-exegetical move sometimes made in Barth's exegesis which renders the concept witness [to divine revelation] more elastic than it otherwise might be. Firstly, not every strand of biblical witness is straightforwardly witness. It is necessary to realise, however, that when this is the case - when, that is, a passage of the Bible appears unrelated to the central biblical function - it is exegetically to be brought into relation to this function. Or rather, it is exegetically to be recognised that it has already assumed this function by its presence in the Bible despite its immanent characteristics. For example, when arguing against the concept of the analogy of being in natural theology in [CD II/1], Barth concedes the presence in the Bible of several passages (e.g. the 'Nature Psalms') suspiciously like natural theology, and devoid, therefore, of any witness to a fact of divine revelation ([CD II/1,] pp 97-176). They are numerous enough to constitute a 'side line' to the 'main line' of the Biblical witness. Barth's solution? Quite simply to insist that, when expounding such passages, they must always be systematically subordinated in intent and meaning to the main line of biblical witness. They are witness, because they must be brought into relation to witness. Or rather, it must be seen that they have been brought into such a relation; Barth never once, to my knowledge, offers an exegesis of a biblical passage that suggests it must be made to bear witness. He rather at times suggests that great care must be taken to recognise the place of a passage in the Bible as a whole, lest the concealed relation of a passage to the biblical witness remain unnoticed.¹⁵

As indicated, I have laid particular emphasis on this passage because of the unusual candour with which McGlasson draws attention to an obvious problem in Barth's exegesis. This seems to me to contrast with Cunningham and Hunsinger, who, so far as I can tell, do not see a problem here at all. The problem is simply that, in different ways, Barth appears quite frankly to be imposing his own theological scheme on the Bible, while at the same time evincing an untroubled assurance that he is simply being true to the Bible itself. If I understand correctly, McGlasson states that it is beyond the purpose of his

¹⁵ Jesus and Judas, p 21.

thesis to attempt a response to this problem - but, clearly, such a limit is not adequate to my own purposes.¹⁶

We seem to find the same kind of difficulty in the exposition of Bruce McCormack, who is of interest partly because he consciously writes outside or even against the 'Yale school' which we have considered thus far, but also because of his sustained argument that Barth was specifically concerned with the historical task of establishing the original meaning of the scriptural authors. McCormack has argued this last point against recent 'postmodern' interpretations of Barth which claim that his exegesis was based on 'anti-historical' principles and was therefore opposed to the traditional exegetical principle of establishing the intention of the author.¹⁷ This is of interest to me because the 'postmodern' interpretations of Barth could at least make sense of the fact that Barth's exegesis frequently does not, so far as we can tell, correspond to the intentions of the biblical authors. McCormack's argument that Barth was not anti-historical and not opposed to 'authorial intention' would seem to raise again the question - how is it that Barth's interpretations nevertheless do not reflect the meaning of the authors? And yet McCormack does not consider this latter question, and I think this is because he adopts a similar compromise to the 'Yale school' concerning the rôle of theological commitment.

¹⁶ This is my understanding of a passage in *Jesus and Judas* (pp 40-1) where McGlasson alludes to the same problem: 'Barth offers his exegesis of the Bible as a witness to the Word of God as if everybody could see that this is just what the Bible itself obviously requires.' McGlasson goes on to comment: 'The world of Barth's exegesis of the Bible is so large that it includes within it the reasons for entering it. Or, it is so small that it drives away all but the partisan few. In suggesting these two different ways of seeing the logic of Barth's approach we have come up against a wall separating two comprehensive visions of argument generally; it cannot be the purpose of this dissertation to breach this wall.' McGlasson seems to be saying that Barth assumes as self-evident that his theology is biblical, without allowing for any independent or impartial investigation into the Bible to see if this assumption is correct - and that the problem of the circular and alienating nature of this reasoning is beyond the scope of McGlasson's present investigation. (I think that in the passage under consideration McGlasson may be alluding to a 'postliberal' conception in which theological truth is not dependent on external universal criteria, but rather on internal criteria only.)

¹⁷ B.McCormack, 'Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest in Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of the New Testament', pp 324-5; B.McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp 232-3; referring to M. Wallace, 'Karl Barth's Hermeneutic: A Way Beyond the Impasse'.

The fact is, I believe that McCormack and the other writers reviewed so far show an *inadequate awareness of the tension between ‘objectivity’ in scriptural interpretation and the rôle of ‘theological commitment’*. In McCormack’s case, it is argued that Barth remained committed to the principle of authorial intention in his understanding of scriptural interpretation, and this would seem to mean that for Barth there is a possibility of objective knowledge of the meaning of scriptural texts. However, McCormack also argues that according to Barth there was no such thing as truly ‘objective’ exegesis, because all exegesis involves some kind of prior dogmatic principles or presuppositions. Even in critical exegesis (or especially there) one cannot eliminate presuppositions as such; the only thing one can do is to choose which presuppositions one wishes to use. According to McCormack - if I understand him correctly - Barth chooses a specific presupposition drawn from the witness of the Church, namely that God has spoken in history.¹⁸ McCormack then claims that this allows Barth to reach at least an approximate objectivity in interpreting Scripture.

My point is, I do not see how a principle or presupposition which is avowedly ‘partial’ and drawn from a specific reading community can lay claim to any such ‘objectivity’. McCormack is, we may suppose, strongly opposed to any ‘postmodern’ epistemological option which would understand the ‘meaning’ of a text solely as the property of a particular reading community. So he seems to be forced to alternate between claiming on the one hand that Barth has adopted his presupposition as a responsible member of the Church (i.e. in loyalty to a given reading community) and claiming on the other hand that Barth has derived his presupposition from the Scripture (or New Testament?) itself. And yet it is very hard to understand why beliefs and traditions in the sphere of the Church should in and of themselves give an ‘objective’ view of the meaning of Scripture. Put another way: it is hard to understand why the hidden presuppositions of historical-

¹⁸ Naturally, this presupposition does not seem very dramatic, and could surely be consistent with a historical-critical approach. However my present point is not whether such a conclusion about the meaning of Scripture could be reconciled with a historical-critical approach; my concern rather is with McCormack’s argument that it is in fact derived from the witnessing ‘Church’.

criticism should be labelled 'subjectivist', whereas the faith commitment which is in line with Church tradition is termed 'objective', i.e. in line with Scripture.¹⁹

My argument here is not with the accuracy of McCormack's presentation of Barth's position but rather with the fact that he seems to be positively recommending it without seeming to notice the severe difficulties involved in such an approach. Throughout my analysis of the various sympathetic responses to Barth's exegetical theory and practice, I do not believe I have found an adequate response to the problem that when Barth incorporates prior theological commitments or presuppositions into his exegesis, then this must on the face of it invalidate any claim to exegetical objectivity. I cannot help but sympathise with James Barr's argument in his inaugural address, when he states that 'no one can advance or establish an opinion within biblical study on the grounds that he has the right presuppositions'.²⁰

¹⁹ A few quotations from McCormack's essay ('Historical-Criticism and Dogmatic Interest') will be sufficient evidence of this unresolved ambiguity: 'From the very beginning of his hermeneutical revolution, Barth was thoroughly convinced that a neutral, disinterested exegesis was an impossibility. Many factors, both historical and cultural, condition our attempts to understand the meaning of Scripture. Barth was also convinced, however, that although these factors can never be completely eliminated, we do enjoy a freedom within limits to choose which among them we would like to hear above all others. For the interpreter of the Scriptures of the Church, the choice was clear: it is the voice of the Church which was to provide that one conditioning factor above all others to which the interpreter should happily look for guidance.' (pp 335-6.) 'Barth's theological exegesis of the Bible never pretended to be impartial...It set out to be partial, to operate from the standpoint of a definite dogmatic interest. Years of "impartial" exegesis had taught Barth...that "impartiality" was no guarantee of objectivity...The results of such "impartiality" had been subjectivism, and it was precisely for the sake of a more genuine objectivity that Barth sought to be partial. Every exegete operates with some kind of dogmatic interest. The question is, which dogmatic interest is appropriate to the New Testament? Which is most likely to produce a faithful understanding of the sacred texts of the Church?' (p 338.) 'Was he guilty of imposing a dogmatic a priori on the New Testament? He himself would have said that his dogmatic interest was derived in an a posteriori manner. It was something which he thought he had learned, in a provisional form at least, from the New Testament itself. It was something which was also reinforced in him by his attempts to hear the voice of the Church in the past (etc.)' (p 338.) (Further on this, cf McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, p 348.)

²⁰ *Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p 14. I have no doubt that Barr was thinking of Barth (although perhaps not only of him) when he wrote these words. Barr's argument is important, for (as he recognises) it does not follow that because we necessarily bring presuppositions to a text, then we are therefore justified in actively embracing certain presuppositions in

*It therefore seems to me that, for a more adequate approach to the problems of Barth's exegesis, we need a careful study of the meaning of subjectivity and objectivity, or of the rôle of the subject-object relation, in his theology and exegesis. Above all, my question is - why is it that Barth seems to think he can counter the subjectivism he believes he finds concealed within previous critical exegesis with the sheer assertion of traditional Christian belief - or even with the assertion of his own dogmatic principles? Why, in other words, is a hidden subjectivism of liberal critical exegesis to be seemingly replaced with an open subjectivism of Christian (or even 'Barthian') belief?*²¹

This, then, is my programmatic statement of the line of enquiry to be undertaken in this thesis. But before I proceed to fill out this basic statement with certain methodological remarks, I would like to mention one further highly significant study of Barth's exegesis. During the course of my research, there appeared a full length study from McCormack's own school (i.e. Princeton Theological Seminary) entitled *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: the Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period*, written by Richard Burnett. This work seems to me to be considerably more promising than previous studies of Barth's exegesis, and I have made extensive use of it in the later parts of my thesis. However, in spite of my appreciation of Burnett's achievement, I still find that my own concerns are not adequately addressed in his work. First of all, Burnett does not give any

the sense of a loyalty to a given faith-tradition or theological approach (Does Biblical Study Still Belong to Theology?, pp 13-14). I mention this because McCormack seems in one or two places to be hinting that Barth's exegesis can be understood in terms of the 'hermeneutical circle' in which provisional presuppositions are progressively corrected through engagement with details. It seems to me that comparing Barth with some such version of the 'hermeneutical circle' can only work if one plays down the tenacity of his theological commitments in his exegetical practice; these commitments are certainly not progressively corrected through engagement with details. On the contrary, as McGlasson observes (see above) the entire difficulty with Barth's exegesis is that he allows his a priori dogmatic principles to predetermine the handling of details.

²¹ Of course, it is a controversial question whether Barth is a faithful interpreter of the tradition of the Church. My point here is, even if he is a faithful interpreter of Church tradition, this would not entitle him to read Church tradition back into Scripture itself. The problem would of course be exacerbated if (as has been claimed) he was also distorting the tradition of Church dogma. (cf P.Avis, 'Karl Barth: The Reluctant Virtuoso', *Theology* 86 (1983), pp 164-171.)

treatment of the problems involved in Barth's actual exegetical practice. His work is in part a reaction against the tendency of the 'Yale school' which does emphasise Barth's exegetical practice; Burnett consciously returns to the previous approach of emphasising Barth's general hermeneutical statements. Whereas I believe he is right to do this, it is only natural that this approach does not lead him to consider the serious difficulties associated with the details of Barth's exegesis. Secondly, I find as before that there is no adequate investigation of the relationship between Barth's commitment to the meaning of the text itself and his prior theological commitments. And so, although I believe Burnett's study to be far more promising than previous studies, this by no means nullifies the need for the present study.

I will now proceed to make some comments on the methodological procedure of this thesis.

The Case Study: Christ and Adam

As indicated in the title of my thesis, I have chosen to make use of a case study in the course of my enquiry into the problems of Barth's exegesis. For this, I have chosen Barth's short book *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*.²² The principal reason for my choice is that this book provides a vivid example of Barth's unnatural exegesis - that is, of where Barth appears to impose his own dogmatic principles onto a text, whilst using arguments which lack even superficial plausibility.

There are, of course, difficulties in employing such a narrow base to assess the nature of Barth's exegesis as such. Previous studies which have made use of instances of his actual exegetical practice have used a broader base, although they also have been limited to the

²² (Edinburgh/London: Oliver and Boyd, 1956). German original: *Christus und Adam nach Röm 5: ein Beitrag zur Frage nach dem Menschen und der Menschheit*, published in June 1952 by Evangelischer Verlag A.G. Zollikon-Zurich as No. 35 in the series *Theologische Studien*. The essay was later published by the same publisher in a second edition in 1964 together with another essay by Barth entitled *Rudolf Bultmann: ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen*.

merest fraction of Barth's exegetical material.²³ The reader may also observe that even within the scope of the small book *Christ and Adam* I have not made use of the full range of its contents, but have instead focused on what I believe to be the main thrust of the work - which of course limits the scope of my material even further. And so, in choosing such a narrow base, there is always the problem that my material may not be representative of Barth's exegesis generally.

On the other side, to state the obvious, the use of the case study is generally recognised to be an important aspect of research because it allows for a level of detailed enquiry which may be lost in a broader sweep of data. And also, with regard to my own line of enquiry, it is my hope that focusing on a particular instance of Barth's exegesis will check any tendency to rest easy with a discovery of apparently fruitful general principles or general patterns of exegesis, and will lead us to consider the viability of Barth's exegesis of the particular text under consideration (i.e. of Romans chapter 5). If we remain with a particular instance of exegesis, then we will have to be concerned with the seemingly intractable question of whether this exegesis is fruitful for an understanding of this text - and, if not, then why not? However, I would freely concede the limitations of my own approach, and would say that any results would need to be confirmed or modified through a broader study of Barth's exegetical practice.

Another issue, more difficult to explain, is exactly how I relate this case study material to the theological question I have identified - that is, how do I relate the exegesis found in

²³ e.g. Frei, Kelsey and Ford have chiefly made use of Barth's exegesis in CD IV/I and following; McGlasson of his exegesis in CD I/1 and I/2, and Cunningham studied Barth's exegesis of the prologue of John, and, in connection with this, of Ephesians 1:4. An important exception, however, is C.Baxter's statistical study which aims to cover the entire Dogmatics ('Barth - A Truly Biblical Theologian?', Tyndale Bulletin 38 (1987), pp 3-27; also 'The Movement from Exegesis to Dogmatics in the Theology of Karl Barth' (PhD dissertation, University of Durham, 1981). As a comment on Baxter's study, I would say that her statistical analysis seems to highlight the problem of Barth's unnatural exegesis, in that it shows how his biblical interpretation is characterised by a dogmatically motivated selectivity. However, Baxter does not draw from this the natural conclusion that Barth did not base his theology on the Bible and hence was not a biblical theologian. Against the evident force of her results she draws attention to Barth's 'intention' to be biblical and also his fallibility as a human being - which do not seem to me to be strong arguments. ('Barth - A Truly Biblical Theologian?', p 26.)

Christ and Adam to the 'subject/object' problem? It may be expected that I would relate the question of the subject/object relation to the method of Barth's exegesis; and yet readers will find that I relate it directly to the content (or conclusions) of Barth's exegesis. This requires further elaboration.

The 'method' of Barth's exegesis denotes, of course, the means by which he comes to his exegetical conclusions or to his view of Paul's meaning; the 'content', on the other hand, denotes the conclusions themselves i.e. Barth's view or statement of what Paul's meaning actually was. Now, it may be expected that I make a study of Barth's view of the subject/object relation in order to attain a deeper understanding of Barth's exegetical method, which method would then be exemplified in Christ and Adam. For is not the subject/object relation in essence the question of how we attain objectivity, which is surely a question of method? However, it will be seen that I relate Barth's view about the subject/object relation not to his method but directly to the content or conclusions of his exegesis - i.e. directly to his own statement of what Paul (supposedly) meant. This will mean that the question of Barth's method - the question of how he moves from the text to his view of the text's meaning - seems to be passed over. But does this not mean that we are passing over the whole question of whether Barth's exegesis is a viable interpretation of the text in front of us?

There is, however, a specific reason for my approach, as I will now seek to explain. The fact is, a comparison between Barth's interpretation and the evident meaning of the text will disclose that he is indeed reading into the text a pre-formed theological content. The main characteristic of Barth's exegesis is not anything we would recognise as 'method', but rather is a determination to read the text in terms of a particular content; and so, it is this content rather than the method which is the proper focus of any study of his exegesis.

I would actually agree with McCormack that when Barth reads Scripture in terms of this pre-given theological content, this is in response to the problem of the subjectivism concealed within historical criticism. But precisely this leads to my fundamental question - why does Barth think that he can counter a hidden subjectivism with what seems so much like a deliberate and conscious subjectivist assertion of Christian (or Barthian)

faith? The present thesis is based on the idea that if we examine this pre-given theological content within the framework of a more flexible and concrete account of the subject/object problem, then we will release some of the unbearable tension that exists between Barth's exegesis and contemporary critical exegesis - not to mention the tension with sheer common sense. And perhaps, instead of remaining with this rather modest and defensive aim, we will be able to glean some constructive insights from Barth's exegesis for contemporary critical study of Scripture. But our starting point will have to be with the fact that Barth does read into individual scriptural texts prior dogmatic principles which, by means of any recognisable method, are not to be found in the texts themselves. It is only through a study of these prior dogmatic principles and their relation to the modern ideal of objectivity that we can ask serious questions about why Barth expects such a patently eisegetical procedure to be conducive to real objectivity, that is, to clearing away the normal subjectivist barriers which block the way to the 'real' meaning and message of the Scriptures.

If this account of my approach appears too abstract, or, alternatively, if it seems to give a rather negative response to my enquiry before I have even begun, then I hope that the structure and aim of my argument will become clearer as it unfolds in subsequent chapters.

In the meantime, I will turn to the other major methodological issue which I believe requires some reflection, namely the difficult subject of the unity of Barth's theology.

The assumption of the unity of Barth's theology

If, as I have said, my starting point is not with Barth's exegetical method but with the dogmatic or theological principles which he incorporates into his exegesis, then this means that I will be setting Barth's exegesis in the broader context of his theology as such. Therefore, I will need to take up a position on what his theological approach actually is. I am mentioning this here because my approach to Barth's theology may appear to be rather naïve, in that I seem to make the assumption that Barth's theology can

be understood as the outworking or implementation of a single or basic principle. And precisely this seems to be contrary to current Barthian orthodoxy.

For example: Bruce Marshall, with reference to a certain ‘caustic’ remark of Eberhard Jüngel, comments as follows on Barth:

Few theological writers of any period resist independent attempts critically and informatively to state the logic of their actual procedure quite as effectively as does Barth. This relative intractability to fruitful analysis makes an exceptionally daunting and perhaps misguided enterprise of the project of finding a Konstruktionsprinzip, a systematic or methodological principle or concept which governs the whole in all of its parts.²⁴

Marshall takes this as an occasion for a disclaimer - i.e. for a statement of the limitations of his own enquiry, in that his specific conclusion does not involve any claim to have found the Konstruktionsprinzip of Barth’s theology as such. Later on, G.Hunsinger would take up the same question, but in a less defensive way. Hunsinger claims that studies previous to his can be divided into two types: those which attempt to find a single Konstruktionsprinzip for Barth’s theology, and those which adopt the loci approach, i.e. which focus on a series of disparate themes without making any significant attempt to find an underlying unity. Hunsinger finds both approaches unsatisfactory, and advocates a middle way whereby he outlines a number of distinctive ‘motifs’ which are to be found throughout Barth’s theology (or at least throughout the Church Dogmatics) but which cannot be reduced to a single, unitary principle. Hunsinger’s general approach, together with his individual insights about the nature of these motifs, generates an especially constructive and fruitful exposition of Barth’s theology.²⁵

²⁴ Bruce Marshall, *Christology in Conflict: The Identity of a Saviour in Rahner and Barth* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), p 116 - referring to Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, p 14. (Jüngel writes: ‘...Barth scholarship - and here I include everything that passes for Barth scholarship - is particularly concerned to reduce the extraordinary wealth of his theology to a few meager structural principles [=Konstruktionsprinzipien], so that his theology may be totally circumscribed and then commended or refuted.’)

²⁵ G.Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, pp 3-4.

In view of this received wisdom with regard to Barth's theology, it no doubt will appear at the very least retrogressive if I start talking about a single or basic insight which underlies it. I certainly have no wish to go against these more sophisticated readings of Barth which have sought to transcend simplistic readings and to do justice to the complexity and subtlety of his thought. Above all, I have no wish to disavow my own dependence on them. However, I am by no means convinced that it is so misguided to search for a basic, unifying principle behind Barth's theology - although it is certainly foolhardy to claim to have discovered such a principle once and for all.

Perhaps the most concrete reason why Barth's theology is allegedly not to be reduced to a single, overarching principle is that his theology represents an attempt to subordinate all general principles to the highly particular self-revelation of God in Christ. This also means that, according to Barth, theology must remain specifically theological, and that it must not be answerable to any general or (put another way) to any philosophical principles.

It is on the last point where I believe I must demur. My own argument is that Barth's theology can be understood as an outworking of a basic philosophical principle, and, conversely, that the principle underlying the emergence of Barth's distinctive theology is not specifically theological.

To speak in more general terms, my own understanding of the nature of theology is as follows: it is, at least in principle, the mediation between philosophy and religious belief. Christian theology is, accordingly, the mediation between philosophy and Christian faith. By philosophy I mean the investigation of the general epistemological principles which underlie the various branches and forms of human knowledge and activity. The task of the academic discipline of (Christian) theology is to subject Christian belief to the rigours of philosophical enquiry and philosophical criticism. And because philosophy mediates between the various forms of human knowledge, then theology brings Christian belief into connection with other branches of human knowledge, such as history, psychology, anthropology, ethics, etc.

It will quite naturally be objected that this definition of theology is diametrically opposed to Barth's own.²⁶ Barth argued, especially in his dispute with Bultmann, that theology must not have a fixed relation to any philosophical position.²⁷ How can I possibly claim, then, that Barth's theology represents the outworking of a specific philosophical principle or insight?

I fully recognise that on a verbal or formal level such criticism is justified, and I do not wish to underestimate the significance of this. However, I am convinced that no author can be understood if we confine ourselves to a repetition or summary of the forms of his expressions. Precisely in order to understand an author, we must be prepared to take the risk of expressing ourselves differently from him, even to the point of appearing to contradict him. To achieve this, we must look behind the form of words to their function and scope.

Now, Barth clearly understood a 'positive' relationship between theology and philosophy to imply a systematic accommodation of the specifically Christian proclamation to the cultural climate of a given society. I believe this is because he understood philosophy as the expression of the culture in which it arises. In his mind, to insist on a positive relationship between theology and philosophy would mean that the corresponding Christian proclamation would be unable to stand over against the current cultural climate, but, on the contrary, would be condemned to reinforce the cultural situation to which it addressed itself.²⁸

²⁶ e.g. CD I/1, p 6.

²⁷ See especially Barth's letter to Bultmann, dated 24th December 1952 (Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters 1922-1966 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), p 105.)

²⁸ cf The parallel formulations in Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV/4, Lecture Fragments* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p 139: 'The church in defect is the church which looks anxiously to its Lord but even more anxiously to everything else; which painfully compares itself to the world; which for this reason seeks possible points of contact from or to it, which is intent on bridges from the one place to the other. The favorite word of this church is the little word "and,"... in such expressions as "revelation and reason," "church and culture," "gospel and state," "Bible and science," "theology and philosophy."' In subsequent chapters I will seek to show how deep-rooted in Barth's theology is his concern that church proclamation should not accommodate itself to the prevailing culture.

But - the question is - what if the scope of philosophy were broadened to include as essential a principle or principles of counter-cultural criticism? Would this perhaps make a difference to the way we understand the relationship between theology and philosophy in Barth, even if - or precisely because - we remain materially faithful to his thought?

These are only preliminary remarks, and are certainly not intended to lay the foundation for my proposed revision of the relationship between theology and philosophy in Barth's thought. What I mean and intend by this must be gathered not from my preliminary comments here, but from the more detailed arguments in the main body of my thesis. But here I would say that I will not be understood at all if I am taken to mean that Barth's concept of the relation between theology and philosophy was a mere function or epiphenomenon of his need to criticise certain elements of contemporary culture. That would be a reductionist and pragmatist account of his purposes, which I do not intend. Barth's criticism extends specifically to the underlying thought forms of cultural and theological discourse, and cannot be understood in terms of pragmatic, external counter-cultural or political principles. But again, subsequent chapters must give a more concrete account of my meaning here.

It may well be asked whether it is wise to raise such drastic and unorthodox questions about the nature of Barth's theology within the scope of a thesis which is, after all, only about Barth's exegesis. However, I do not think that Barth's exegesis should be understood as only one part or aspect of his theology. The starting point of Barth's distinctive theological approach was, in its own terms, intended to be a concerted and fresh turn to the Scriptures. Given that this is the case, then the fact that his theological positions do not seem to correspond to the meaning and content of the biblical texts to which they are related should surely be regarded as the most urgent question about his theology which we can ask. Put another way: if his theology was meant to be grounded in a turn to the Scriptures, then we are asking fundamental questions about the nature of his theology as such when we address ourselves to the question of what this turn to the Scriptures actually involved.

On the other hand, there may be those, coming as it were from the opposite direction, who would ask whether it is beside the point to investigate the viability of Barth's exegesis. That is, for some it may be thought irrelevant whether Barth's theological position represents a viable interpretation of Scripture, because this would leave unanswered the more fundamental question as to whether a renewed focus on Scripture is itself justified. The point is that even if Barth's interpretation of Scripture is generally or even entirely correct, nevertheless this would not answer the more fundamental question of the truth and/or relevance of Scripture as such. Such criticisms assume (correctly in my view) that today we can no longer take for granted the traditional Protestant principles of the finality and sufficiency of Scripture. In response to this, I cannot emphasise too strongly that this thesis is meant to provide an enquiry into this kind of question also. The question of what is involved in Barth's theology necessary includes - not incidentally, but fundamentally - the question of why Barth thought it necessary to turn to the Scripture in the historical and vocational situation in which he found himself. My focus on Barth's exegesis should not in the least be taken to mean a 'bracketing out' of questions about Barth's theology and thought as a whole.²⁹

A final comment I feel is required before I draw my introduction to a close. As may have in some part become apparent, the purpose of my research is not to question whether previous authors have portrayed the content of Barth's theology accurately. In other words, this is not primarily an exercise in historical theology, however much I will seek to put Barth's theology in its historical context. In so far as I do make use of historical theology, I am happy to acknowledge my dependence on previous writers, especially McCormack and Burnett. My difficulty with previous writers (and the corresponding originality of my own approach) is not to be found in their portrayal of Barth's theology as such, but rather in their failure to ask the decisive critical questions about it, and their corresponding failure to test his theology and to seek to understand it in terms of those critical questions. On the other side, it will become apparent that my method does not entail taking up a critical position with regard to Barth himself, still less to suggest

²⁹ I think that the writers I have mentioned so far who criticise Barth for his unnatural exegesis themselves come from this 'opposite direction'; that is, they hold to the position that an exclusive focus on Scripture is misguided and inadequate, and so make use of Barth's unnatural exegesis as an additional argument against his turn to the Scripture.

improvements or emendations to his theology. I have consciously resisted the temptation to criticise Barth himself, and have made the assumption that his theology is adequate to answer the critical questions which I place to it - which I believe corresponds to Barth's own approach to Paul (i.e. in his early Romans commentary).³⁰ But also - as is the case with Barth's approach to Paul - my approach has the disadvantage that it may be difficult to see where Barth ends and my own position begins.

But I still believe mine to be the most constructive approach in studying a theologian and thinker as nuanced and complex as Barth (as is also the case with other great thinkers). I believe that the best path towards a constructive understanding of him is found neither through a descriptive, historical approach, nor through an external, critical approach. To explain this further - a purely descriptive approach always leaves me asking certain critical questions about how Barth's theology can possibly be valid at such and such a point; and yet when any writer directly criticises Barth, I am always left wondering whether we could not explore further ways of defending his theology on the apparently vulnerable issue. This is why I have sought the middle path, of seeking to ask the decisive questions seemingly ignored or inadequately addressed by others, whilst at the same time exploring ways of defending Barth's position in relation to these questions. It will be seen that in these explorations I will relate Barth's theology to ideas not explicitly expressed in his theology as such, but I cling to the hope that this will deepen our understanding of his theology, in spite of the risk of confusing his theology with alien criteria.

As indicated earlier in this chapter, I believe that what is called for in understanding the problems of Barth's unnatural exegesis is a renewed consideration of the problem of the subject/object relation in his theology, and it is to this I now turn in my second chapter.

³⁰ Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933). The relevant details of Barth's approach to Paul will emerge in my fourth chapter below.

Chapter Two

Humanity and the Subject/Object Relation in Barth's Theology

Most studies of Barth will at some crucial point bring in the question of the subject-object relation in his theology. Instead of seeking to provide a detailed review of how others have approached this, it will be adequate to my purposes and quite possibly clearer if I simply state the basis and origin of my own concern. And my own concern regarding Barth's general position on the subject/object relation is most clearly expressed by W. Pannenberg in his criticism of Barth and his 'school'. Hence I will begin with a summary of this criticism as laid out in Pannenberg's *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*.

In essence, Pannenberg's criticism is simple: Barth assumes without argument the truth and validity of the Christian revelation, without allowing for any generally intelligible criteria for establishing this truth or for discussing it as a truth claim. Pannenberg notes that Barth understands his procedure to entail genuine objectivity, in that he (Barth) believes that he is conducting his enquiry in a way which is appropriate to the object concerned. For the object of theology is God's self-revelation in Christ, which (according to Barth) must not be determined by the conditions laid down by the human subject, for this would cause the divine object to be compromised by the conditions laid down by the 'natural (sinful) man'. Pannenberg notes Barth's concern, but nevertheless claims that this leaves Christian theology with nothing but a sheer, irrational assertion for its basis. In other words, Barth's attempt at genuine objectivity ends up in sheer subjectivism.¹

¹ 'When the foundation of theology is left to a venture [of faith] in this way, not only is its scientific status endangered, but also the priority of God and his revelation over human beings, on which, for Barth, everything rests. Barth's unmediated starting point from God and his revealing word turns out to be no more than an unfounded postulate of theological consciousness. Barth rightly rejects the reduction of the subject-matter of theology to human religious consciousness, but...Barth's description of the obedience of faith as a venture shows...that a positive theory of revelation not only is not an alternative to subjectivism in theology, but is in fact the furthest extreme of subjectivism made into a theological position...Barth's apparently so lofty objectivity about God and God's word turns out to rest on no more than the irrational subjectivity of a venture of faith with no justification outside itself.' (Pannenberg, *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, pp 272-3.) Earlier in the same book, Pannenberg discusses the views of H. Diem (a representative of Barth's 'school'). Diem's view is that theology should not be subject to general criteria of

My own view is that there can be no question that Pannenberg has a legitimate concern here; however, I am not convinced that Barth thereby stands refuted, and - as suggested in my previous chapter - I would rather pursue means of exploring the question further in relation to Barth's theology, in preference to simply dismissing him and constructing my own alternative. Thus I will now attempt to provide a detailed but at the same time straightforward and basic account of the problem of subjectivity and objectivity. This will enable us to examine more precisely why Barth's theology of revelation appears as sheer subjectivism to modern thought (as represented here by Pannenberg). As stated in my first chapter, my aim in doing this is to analyse what is meant by objective exegesis, but I am adopting the method of looking at the broader question first, so that we may afterwards look at the specific question in the light of these more general reflections.

The subject/object relation in modern thought as established by Descartes

We may begin with the following observation. It would seem that in order to be truly objective, we must first attain an awareness of the limits of our own subjectivity, and must first establish our subjective capacities, before we can attain to true objectivity. How do I know I am not influenced by my own subjective prejudices when I believe I am being objective? I know that there are things which seem to me to be obviously true, but which to other people seem to be less obvious or simply false. Clearly, this affects us in the area of religion. My religious experiences, which seem to me to establish beyond doubt the reality of God, often do not seem to have much effect when I try to share them with other people. My arguments for the existence of God and the truth of the Christian revelation, which I find ever so convincing, do not seem so convincing to other people. In order to attain to certainty, I have to reflect on the possibility that I am prejudiced, that what seems to me to be a direct grasp of the object may be partly due to the specific conditions and

scientific discussion 'because the other sciences accept the assumptions of "natural", i.e. sinful man'. Pannenberg questions them on the following grounds: 'What means has theology of justifying its claim to be automatically in a different and privileged position when the truth of its statements is challenged? Any such claim can be no more than an empty assertion. Even if claims of this sort are made on the theological side with disarming innocence, it is understandable, to say no more, if in other quarters they give the impression of immense arrogance on the part of a discipline which can ultimately, as a discipline, be no more than human.' (p 19.)

context of my subjectivity - maybe I think in a certain way because of my background, my circumstances, my characteristic vices or weaknesses and so on.

Of course this does not mean that I cannot attain certainty in my own beliefs, and must remain forever in doubt. I may conclude, after reflection, that it is not I, but 'other people' who are prejudiced; or, better, I may modify my own beliefs in the light of the experiences and opinions of other people. I may hope to return the favour and cause them to reflect on their prejudices and to modify their beliefs. In this way I can attain to a better understanding of my own limitations and prejudices as a thinking subject, through the help of other people, and thus learn to make a distinction between where I have really grasped the object in its own nature and where I have imposed my own subjective impressions or prejudices on the object.

Now, I understand that this way of thinking has not been obvious to all people of all times, but - at least supposedly - has its historical roots in the thought and influence of René Descartes, in so far as he is credited with being the 'father of modern philosophy' or even the 'father of modern thought'. Of course, it is historically questionable whether one thinker should be credited with so much epochal influence. It is highly probable, in principle, that Descartes was at most one amongst other contributors to the emergence of modern thought (assuming, of course, that there is such a thing as 'modern thought'). Further, Descartes himself may be less 'modern' than is normally supposed, and his reputation of being the father of modern thought may rest on later developments being read back into his writings.² More serious than this, however, is the possibility that Descartes' reputation as being the father of modern thought is itself connected with a misunderstanding of the nature of modern thought, and that there are other figures or movements which are different or even antithetical to Descartes but which are no less significant for understanding the nature of modern thought. However, in spite of these reservations, I will proceed by employing as at least a heuristic or provisional principle that

² cf S.Gaukroger, *Descartes: an Intellectual Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p 3: 'Although the idea of Descartes as the "father of modern philosophy" is, I suspect, one that has its origins in nineteenth century historiography of philosophy, it is undeniable that he has had a pivotal role in philosophical thinking since the middle of the seventeenth century. This pivotal role arises, however, at least in part as a result of various kinds of philosophical or other investments that later thinkers and teachers have made in him.'

Descartes can be understood as supremely representative of the main characteristics of what may, for the sake of argument, be termed ‘modern thought’.³

As I see it, Descartes promoted a concept of truth and rationality grounded in what is generally and universally accessible; his epistemology was based on that which is evident and clear to all people.⁴ He was strongly opposed to scholastic speculation, which was based on ideas which were interesting because of their complexity and subtlety, but which were unlikely to be true because they had lost touch with that which is known with

³ The most confident statement of Descartes’ relation to modern thought I have found is contained in Albert Balz’ introduction to his work entitled *Descartes and the Modern Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). ‘The mind of Descartes represents the mind of an age. If, then, Descartes be rightly described as the father of modern philosophy, he can be described with equal right as the father of modernity. However defective his “first” philosophy, however vain his passion for certainty, however mistaken or inadequately formulated his scientific hypotheses, and, finally, however incomplete his concepts of method and of the metaphysical foundations of science, Descartes remains in spirit, in prophetic insight, and in generous ideality the father of the modern mind. It may be urged that there were many founding fathers. Let this be conceded. Nevertheless, in the perspective of three centuries, Descartes is seen as first among equals.’ (p viii.) What strikes me here is not only the impression of historiographical naïveté about Descartes himself but also the implicitly laudatory view of the nature of modern (presumably Western European-Northern American) civilisation. My own use of Descartes, in which I provisionally accept the designation of him as the father of modern thought, is intended very differently. I intend to highlight a persistent question about the self-understanding of modern thought (viz. ‘objectivity’), and the associated problems of this self-understanding.

⁴ James C. Livingston, in his history of modern Christian thought, defines the ‘Cartesian’ Enlightenment in standard terms as follows: ‘More than anything else the Enlightenment marks a revolt against authoritarianism and the emergence of individual reason and conscience as the primary arbiter of truth and action.’ (*Modern Christian Thought Volume One: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997), p 6); Livingston notes that ‘the [eighteenth century] philosophes ... looked to the rationalist Descartes as the one who had liberated the mind from blind authority’ (p 7). However when I read Descartes what strikes me is not so much the issue of ‘autonomous reason’ but that in his view a capacity for truth is in the hands of each and every individual. Descartes’ famous ‘Discourse on the Method’ opens with the foundational principle that ‘the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false - which is what we properly call “good sense” or “reason” - is naturally equal in all men, and consequently...the diversity of our opinions does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things’. (‘Discourse on the Method’ (Part One) in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p 111.)

certainty. To put it another way, something which is fascinating to a highly intelligent person is not for that reason to be held as true. And yet, in Descartes' own day many 'learned' people of the theological faculties found doctrines very convincing for precisely that reason. In place of this, he proposed that we should restrict truth to that which is clear or practically demonstrable to all.⁵

Of course, Descartes had to cope with the fact that all people did not agree on those basic principles which he wished to claim as 'clear and distinct ideas'. This he attributed to prejudice - i.e. reason could be perverted by being obstinately attached to a given tradition of thought. Thus an essential part of his work was to seek to abolish prejudice in principle - to start from ideas which are clear and simple to each and every human mind, and to develop complex ideas only by clear lines of reasoning from such simple ideas.⁶

At this point we can see how he related his contention to the subject/object relation at its most basic level - i.e. on the level of sense perception. According to traditional (Aristotelian) ontology, objects which are perceived through the senses are perceived 'as they really are'. Aristotle held that the sensations or sense perceptions which we experience are 'copies' of the actual objects we perceive, and hence there is a fundamental continuity between our subjective perceptions and the objects of our perception.⁷

Descartes labelled this sense prejudice. He argued that our perceptions are not copies of the objects we perceive, but rather representations of what we perceive. Hence we do not perceive things as they really are. For although there is a genuine relation between our perceptions and the objects of our perception, it is a relation established by the reasoning mind rather than a relation directly imposed on the experiencing subject by the objects

⁵ See H.Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity* (New Haven/London: Yale University, 1973), pp 35f; Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method' (Part One), pp 112f.

⁶ Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, p 36; Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method' (Part Two), p 120.

⁷ Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, p 77.

themselves. This is the ontological gap between the subject and object in Cartesian thought.⁸

How does this relate to the rather more complex issue of the object of religious worship and experience?

Descartes himself understood God as the principle which guarantees the relation or continuity between the perceived object and the subjective impression of the object.⁹ However, it must be said that this 'proof of God' has not possessed the same influence as more general Cartesian ideas. Ultimately, we see his influence in the fact that a religion can now be studied as a human phenomenon of religion. A scientific study of any religion, including Christianity, is now held to involve a suspension of judgement regarding its truth claims. What we experience or believe about God is - like immediate sense impressions - merely a representation of God, and has not been directly imposed on our experience by God himself. If we assume that God is simply as we experience him, then this is the mark of prejudice. Indeed, the very reality or existence of God must from henceforth be held as only one among other possibilities as an explanation of our (apparent) experience of God.

How, then, do we proceed to test or demonstrate the truth of our own religious experience or traditions, along Cartesian lines? As I have mentioned above, Descartes underlined the principle that we should only hold as true that which is clear and/or demonstrable to all. And so we come back to my earlier point, that today we tend to feel that we must seek to liberate ourselves from personal prejudice through an openness to other people, to people generally, or to 'all people'. But very quickly, we see a difference from Descartes' original vision developing. Especially in questions of religious truth claims, it becomes apparent that the basic principle needs to be applied more flexibly, and we cannot make a simple appeal to that which is immediately clear or immediately demonstrable to all. We can retain the general principle that truth must be generally and universally accessible. But in

⁸ Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, pp 76, 81-2, 85; Descartes, 'Meditations on First Philosophy' (Third Meditation) in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p 27.

⁹ Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, p 127; Descartes, 'Discourse on the Method' (Part Four), pp 129-130.

practice this has to be a rather distant goal of our enquiries and proposals, for in practice we cannot gain universal agreement on even basic principles.¹⁰

In some cases, logic would seem to be so compelling that any one person by himself could see the truth beyond doubt. If someone cannot see the truth of Pythagoras' theorem, and even disputes it, then he simply needs educating and having the thing explained to him more clearly. Then he could see the inescapable truth of the theorem, with that clarity which would enable him to say that it does not matter if the majority of the human race doesn't see it or doesn't agree with it. However, with something like the ontological proof of God it is a different matter. This proof is more likely to seem persuasive to someone who already believes in God and wants an additional reason for believing, than to someone who doesn't believe in God at all and even sincerely wants to know whether there is a God. In the latter case, if I find this type of proof convincing, I cannot immediately leap to the conclusion that someone who doesn't is being unreasonable. So although I aim to make proposals and demonstrations which would be convincing to 'all reasonable people', I have to leave this principle as an ultimate aim.

I use the term 'all reasonable people' rather than simply 'all people' to reflect the fact that I cannot assume that each and every person will agree on basic principles - and already I have had to qualify even this by speaking of what all reasonable people might ultimately see or agree to. But there are further problems with this idea of 'all reasonable people', which I would like to go on to explore now.

¹⁰ See Caton's comment on Descartes: '...[I]t should be said, that while the optimistic view endures as a conviction, it is complemented by an explanation of deviations from the standard: agreement would be forthcoming, but for the "corruption" of bon sens by prejudice. A perverted reason may refuse to assent to clear and distinct truths. This contingency raises difficulties about the adequacy of either certainty or unanimity as criteria, since perverted reason may equally well claim certainty and unanimity.' (Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, p 36.)

The problem with 'all reasonable people'

As soon as we understand rationality in terms of that which appeals to 'all reasonable people', we are thrown up against the problem of what counts as a reasonable person. On the simplest level, I will count someone as a 'reasonable' person if he shares my opinions and if his experiences resonate closely with my own. And yet as a good Cartesian I am trying to get beyond my own opinions and experiences, in so far as my opinions may be distorted by local or personal prejudices. At the very least, then, I will be prepared to consider someone reasonable even if - indeed especially if - he seems to think and experience very differently from the way I do. For example, as a Christian, I have to recognise that someone might be 'reasonable' even if he/she was not brought up as a Christian and if the appeal of the Christian gospel leaves him/her cold. I will not regard their lack of a Christian upbringing as necessarily 'unfortunate', or their lack of response to the gospel as necessarily due to spiritual blindness. Perhaps I am the one who is unfortunate or blind - my own background does not tell me what it is like to view the world through the eyes of a non-Christian.¹¹

And yet, if I have journeyed so far as to expand my concept of 'all reasonable people' beyond my own religious tradition - nevertheless, it is all too likely that my concept of 'all reasonable people' is limited by complex sociological factors, factors of which I am not immediately aware. My idea of 'all reasonable people' means people I have to do with every day, people from my own culture and time, of my own level of education and so on. I am blind to the fact that all these factors do not simply provide me with a certain level of rationality, but feed me with a particular understanding of the world which is not self-evident or backed up by acceptable reasoning. Expressions like 'obviously' or 'as is well

¹¹ Interestingly, Descartes is able to see that he cannot, by his own principles, assume that the Christian faith he was brought up in is true: as he notes 'there may be men as sensible among the Persians or Chinese as among ourselves' - and yet he appears to regard it as a more practical and useful programme of action to proceed by 'holding constantly to the religion in which by God's grace I had been instructed from my childhood'. ('Discourse on the Method' (Part Three), p 122.) I mention this here to show that Descartes recognised that according to his own principles he should be open to the views of people of remote cultures and different religions, although for practical reasons (and perhaps for his own safety!) he decided to orient himself by the views of those around him.

known' or the more aggressive 'everyone knows that...' - these expressions always conceal a reference to a particular social group (obvious to whom? Well known in whose opinion? etc.). This social group may be very large indeed but it does not literally represent all thinking people of any cultural or religious background whatever.

And so - I suppose I must break the bounds of my socially-conditioned criteria of rationality by expanding my horizons. I must meet and talk openly with as many people from different cultural traditions as I can. I must read more widely - books from different traditions, from different times, reflecting different beliefs, and so on. Now - although this intention may well be commendable, I have first of all to ask with what attitude I am approaching the different cultures etc. It makes all the difference whether I approach people with a secret intention to confirm my own way of thinking, or if I am 'really' open to a different way of thinking. And yet - the more subtle problem, I believe, is that even when I approach different cultures and religions with an intention to be truly open and self-critical, in reality I may be approaching them with a self-indulgent 'Political Correctness' which only affects to take the truth-claims of the 'other people' seriously.

When I speak of taking seriously the experiences and opinions of 'other people', the reason I put this expression 'other people' in inverted commas is because I am aware that it is to a large extent a construct in my mind. What I actually mean by 'other people' is a rather generalised concept; it is not a set of actual people other than myself, recognised and experienced in their true otherness. Naturally, my concept of what 'other people' think is bound to be somewhat generalised at first, and needs to be filled out by my actual meeting with actual people. But - those occasions and experiences of meeting with other people will not give real content to my idea of what other people think, unless I am able in principle to embrace an authentic sense or idea of the otherness of 'other people', rather than an inauthentic sense, socially conditioned and unreflectively received (such as the self-indulgent 'Political Correctness' mentioned above). To put it another way, I am in danger of simply ignoring as the 'dead wood' or confusing aspects of my encounters precisely those things which may be very important to the people I encounter; I will then go away and give an account of their beliefs or opinions which seems to me to be 'sympathetic' but which seems unbalanced, distorted or even unrecognisable to them.

So we can see how the Cartesian subject has come to be identified more generally with 'all reasonable people', and then has itself become entangled with the problem of how to be truly objective in its estimation of 'all reasonable people'. For I find that 'all reasonable people' are both the subject of knowledge, which I want to be identified with, but also the object of my knowledge, which I want to be objective about. But I am trapped in a circle - where are the 'all reasonable people' who will help me to determine what is meant by 'all reasonable people'? And as long as I do not recognise this circle, I will remain at bottom trapped within it, allowing my principle of rationality to be determined by social factors beyond my control - i.e. my concept of 'all reasonable people' is determined not by any actual people I encounter, but by an untested concept which has become unreflectively habitual in the social group to which I belong. I need somehow to step back. But how can I do this?

With this problem or set of problems in mind, I would like to turn now to a further consideration of the fundamental problem or difficulty with Barth's theology, to see how we might locate his theology in relation to our considerations so far.

The problem with Barth

The problem with Barth is that he apparently refuses to give any generally accessible reasons for accepting Christian truth claims. In the present climate, Barth is not likely to get into trouble for refusing to search for proofs for the existence of God and the truth of Christianity - whether this means deducing these truths directly from universally valid or accessible principles (a priori) or drawing them from universally valid or accessible principles via universally recognised evidence (a posteriori). We no longer trust such 'proofs', for we know now that what seems to be universally accessible or recognised turns out not to be so universal when we actually get round to listening to what other people have to say about it. Our sense of logic cannot be the measure of *everyone's* sense of logic, and hence cannot be the measure of logic itself.

But Barth is likely to get into trouble for refusing to recognise the more flexible version of the ‘universally accessible’ which prevails today. We have abandoned proof, we have abandoned a transparent, naïve concept of universality, but we still hope to make a gradual progress towards truth by being in principle open to the views and experiences of all other people. We may be troubled by the fact that we can’t practically speaking meet with and listen to all other human beings alive today or that have ever lived; we may be troubled that even if we could there may be limiting prejudices which affect all human beings collectively, which would bar our way to ultimate truth. But at least we do not give up before we have begun by refusing to be open to others in discussion at all, as Barth does.

I think I am right in saying that when Barth mentions Descartes, he is not narrowly concerned with Descartes himself, but with the more flexible application of Cartesianism which sees beyond the doubting individual or transparent universal subject, and attempts to take into account the diversity and ambiguity of human existence when it formulates its generally valid principles.¹² But, even taking into account this greater flexibility and sophistication, Barth still opposes the construction of a ‘prolegomena to dogmatics’ outlining general principles which are accessible and acceptable to people whether they

¹² Barth does treat Descartes on an individual level in CD III/1, pp 350f, especially in relation to Descartes’ supposed demonstration of the existence of God. I think the central point of Barth’s criticism appears on p 360: ‘How can the objective existence of God be demonstrated so long as the supreme force of the proof consists in the necessity under the pressure of which man cannot help attributing objective existence to the object of one of his ideas, so that its force is only that of the one who proves and not of the self-demonstration of the One whose existence is to be proved? Anything less than the latter cannot be required in a proof of God’s existence. For by anything less the existence of God, the existence of the One who exists originally, necessarily and essentially, beyond all human constructs and conceptions cannot be demonstrated.’ This is certainly relevant to the argument I am putting forward; yet I am more interested in Barth’s assessment of Descartes’ broad influence than in his assessment of Descartes as an individual - see especially CD I/1, pp 36f, where Barth tells us that since Descartes a ‘comprehensively explicated self-understanding of human existence’ has effectively become the ‘pre-understanding and criterion of theological knowledge’.

are Christian or not, which would then form the basis for demonstrating the viability of the specific content of the Christian faith.¹³

Today many are most likely to squirm when they read Barth saying, in defence of his position, that 'faith' must not take unbelief seriously - because if it did it would not take itself seriously. Faith which takes unbelief seriously would not be faith, he says.¹⁴ Contemporary reaction might well be as follows: we must stop talking about 'unbelief' for a start. We must talk about different beliefs. We must not talk about 'unbelievers', but about 'people who believe differently'. Even if they are not religious believers at all, they may still have faith in moral values and may believe in tolerance and openness towards other people.

But - is this what Barth is talking about? When he talks about 'belief' and 'unbelief', is he thinking about the sum of Christians on the one hand and the sum of non-Christians on the other? Without going into detailed argument over it, I would say that I do not think that he is.¹⁵ Rather, he is opposing a general concept of humanity. Barth does not mean that we do not need to bother about the experiences or opinions of non-Christians, because as Christians we already know we are right - God has shown us what is true! Rather, he is opposing in principle the concept of a general, universal humanity into which both Christians and non-Christians can be placed.¹⁶

¹³ See CD I/1, pp 36f. 'Dogmatic prolegomena on the basis of this conception [which Barth is opposing] obviously consist first in the demonstration that in a general ontology or anthropology there is actually a place for this ontic factor, for the being of Church and faith, and that human existence is practicable also as believing existence.' Compare Descartes' 'remarkably candid...statement' that 'since we were men before we became Christians, it is beyond belief that any man should seriously embrace opinions which he thinks contrary to that right reason which constitutes a man, in order that he may cling to the faith through which he is a Christian' (cited in Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity*, p 126).

¹⁴ CD I/1, p 30.

¹⁵ On this point, see especially Barth's discussion of 'The Word of God and Experience' in CD I/1, - note especially pp 212-3.

¹⁶ I believe this is the force of the following excerpt: 'Is there, as possibility, something generally human of which this specific human phenomenon [i.e. Christian existence] may be regarded as an actualisation? ... [W]e cannot regard [such a view] as Christian to the extent that it interprets the possibility of this reality [Christian existence] as a human possibility, to the extent ... that it seeks to interpret its history, not in

Now, it is at this point that I would integrate my foregoing general discussion of the nature of objectivity with our specific discussion of Barth's theology. In particular, I believe we should associate Barth's 'general humanity' with the unreflective concept of 'all reasonable people' which I considered above. For we can see how it is possible to make the same claim regarding a general concept of humanity as was made for the concept of 'all reasonable people'; one could claim that a general concept of humanity is not a provisional anticipation of humanity as a whole, waiting to be made more particular and concrete by encounter with individual people; rather, one could say that in practice such a general conception of humanity serves as a rigid preconception about humanity, serving private interests, which precludes genuine encounter with others.

That is, I believe it is possible to understand Barth's position as follows: we burden ourselves with a false general concept of humanity because we close our hearts to our fellow men - and women. We understand 'humanity' in our terms, because we attempt to canonise our own form of humanity as that which is universally valid and 'natural'. Concepts which seem to us to be self-evident and 'according to nature', really represent our own collective self-deception which is the result of sin and rebellion against our Creator.¹⁷ The path to a true understanding of humanity is barred by the distorting effect of sin. We can find our way back to a true knowledge of human nature not by our own efforts but only through the activity of God by which he redeems us from sin. Two crucial quotations from Barth's third volume of the Church Dogmatics will illustrate this basic aspect of his theology:

terms of itself, but in terms of a general capacity or of the general historicity of human existence.' (CD I/1, pp 38-9.) To avoid misunderstanding, I should say here (as I will mention further on) that there are no proof-texts from Barth's writings which can demonstrate once and for all the correctness of my approach; rather, this is an experiment in understanding Barth's theology which can only be validated by heuristic means and by attention to the broader structure of his theology and writings.

¹⁷ I am drawing on A.C. Thiselton's discussion of collective/corporate self-deception in *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp 137-44, which in turn is drawing specifically on the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr. The relation and tension between Niebuhr and Barth will receive more detailed attention later on.

If we were referred to a picture of human nature attained or attainable in any other way [than through Christ] we should always have to face the question whether what we think we see and know concerning it is not a delusion, because with our sinful eyes we cannot detect even the corruption of our nature, let alone its intrinsic character, and we are therefore condemned to an unceasing confusion of the natural with the unnatural, and vice versa.¹⁸

The final thing [in theories about man] is always unrest, but not a genuine, pure or open unrest; but an unrest which is obscured by a forceful interpretation or dogmatic view of man, by an exculpation and justification of his existence on the basis of this dogma...[T]he ultimate fact about our human nature, as we shall constantly see in detail, is the self-contradiction of man and the conscious or unconscious self-deception in which he refuses to recognise this truth.¹⁹

These passages will come under closer scrutiny as my thesis unfolds. More importantly, I will seek to show their structural significance in the broader context of his writings and development, for I do not actually suppose that these passages in themselves are sufficient to support the view of Barth's theology which I am presenting here. However, my current purpose is to clarify and explain the understanding of Barth's theology which is being explored in this thesis, and so, instead of giving further evidence from his writings at this point, I will proceed to explain how I think his theology is related to Cartesian thought.

I believe Barth views the self-understanding of humanity as fundamentally marred by sin; the vital difference from Cartesian thought is that in Barth self-understanding is regarded as a barrier to true understanding, rather than as an indispensable precondition. In this case, the object - God in Christ - must act to redeem the subject from its own self-understanding which has fallen prey to sin. I hope I have said enough to indicate that we are at least dealing with a serious practical problem, that what we mean by 'human' or 'natural' or the 'thinking subject' can actually be entangled in collective self-deception; hence, if we are to speak meaningfully of God's saving act, of salvation from sin, then we must take into account this specific form or manifestation of sin. That is, if we attempt to use our prior 'general' idea of nature or humanity or 'the subject' as a necessary precondition for understanding God, then our understanding of God will effectively be under the control of the self-deception concealed within our subjectivity. God (or God in

¹⁸ CD III/2, p 43.

¹⁹ CD III/2; p 47.

Christ) will appear as the one who legitimates or reinforces the sin of self-deception - rather than as the one who redeems us from this sin. Implicitly or explicitly, God will appear as the advocate of our idea of humanity, which is projected as universally valid but in reality serves our own local interests. To sum up - the reason why Barth adheres to the theological principle of the priority of God in Christ is because of his awareness of the socio-political problem of corporate self-deception in humanity's self-understanding.

This general thesis, expressed in my last sentence, will receive more detailed elaboration and defence as my thesis proceeds. But for now, I will seek to apply in general terms how my explorations so far bear on Barth's exegesis of Romans 5 as represented in my case study Christ and Adam.

The significance for Barth's Christ and Adam

Barth's basic position is that we can only know what humanity is in the light of Christ. Even if humanity understands itself as sinful, it is not free from the circle of self-deception by which it closes itself off from God - for its own understanding of sin is itself marred by sin. It can only find its way back to a true self-understanding through God's redeeming act, not by any preparation on its own part.

I have tried to show why I do not believe that this involves a perverse or naïve assumption that we can have a direct access to the oracles of God without bothering to find out or indeed caring whether other people hear God speaking when we do. Rather, in my reading, Barth is responsibly concerned with the real problem that our perception of 'other people' is not as self-evident or innocent as it may seem.

The first thing we notice about Barth's exegesis in our case study text is that he deliberately reverses the normal order of Adam and Christ, and gives his essay the title Christ and Adam. This will recall my words above that if we take our general idea of humanity as a basis for approaching God's revelation in Christ, then we will be taking things in reverse order. We must first receive God's revelation in Christ before we

understand what humanity truly is, for our understanding of man is marred by that sin from which we are redeemed in Christ.

The second thing we notice is that Barth is concerned to show that the passage under consideration (Romans 5) urges not a general anthropology, based on human self-understanding, but a special anthropology based on Christ.²⁰ I find this relevant because, as I said above, general theories of man or approaches to anthropology have a tendency to canonise and make universally valid 'our' form of humanity. Conforming to the image of Christ means that we are able to surrender our self-interest and to attain a true self-understanding of humanity which is not based on our own self-interest. In this sense, true anthropology is based on Christology, rather than vice versa.

In view of this preoccupation with anthropology, I think it important to make an observation about the context of Christ and Adam. The fact is - even though Christ and Adam was written at the time of the part of the Dogmatics in which Barth deals with the doctrine of original sin in detail (i.e. IV/1), and even though an essay focusing on Romans 5:12-21²¹ might be expected have original sin as its central concern - nevertheless Christ and Adam is not basically concerned with original sin, but rather with the doctrine of man and the issue of theological anthropology. Thus, Christ and Adam belongs to an earlier part of the Dogmatics, specifically to the second part of the third volume, which deals with the doctrine of man in considerable detail. As we shall see, it is clear from the substance of Christ and Adam that anthropology is its main concern; but also, Barth himself tells us that the essay was originally intended to be included in that part of Church Dogmatics which deals with the doctrine of man.²²

²⁰ Christ and Adam, p 5.

²¹ As we will see, it is this second half of Romans 5 that Barth is mainly concerned with.

²² CD III/2, introduction p x, reads: 'In a first draft, I had a section on "Man and Humanity" in which I dealt with the individual, societies and society, but I later dropped this because I was not sure enough of the theological approach to this problem.' This is complemented by Barth's own statement in the introduction to the second edition of *Christus und Adam*, where Barth tells us that *Christus und Adam* 'war die Überarbeitung eines Textes, der ursprünglich einen Bestandteil eines nachher aus verschiedenen Gründen in Wegfall gekommenen Paragraphen ("Der Mensch und die Menschheit") der in Band III, 2 der "Kirchlichen Dogmatik" dargestellten Anthropologie bilden sollte' (Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann: ein

And so, in this chapter I have attempted to give some outline of how Barth's position expressed in Christ and Adam may be intelligible and constructive, but this does not in itself demonstrate that the exegesis of Romans 5 contained in this book is valid as exegesis. Taking into account my outline of the theological background, I will shortly take a closer look at the actual content of the exegesis itself. But before I do this, there is a certain matter which I need to deal with in some detail, because I sense that my reading of Barth may be open to certain objections, given the positions expressed in other contemporary readings of Barth.

The Place of Sin in Barth's Theology

The basic issue I need to consider arises from the fact that I have emphasised the social problems of knowledge as a basis for understanding Barth's theology, specifically with regard to the effect of concealed cultural and social factors which may distort human self-awareness and awareness of truth. And the question is whether this reading really accords with the theocentric and christocentric thrust of Barth's theology. Does not Barth disavow any starting point or criterion for theology which is not strictly drawn from God's self-revelation in Christ, including the 'problems' of the social and political sphere?

This issue becomes more sharply defined when I acknowledge that I have drawn the concept of 'corporate self-deception' not from Barth himself, but from Barth's theological opponent, Reinhold Niebuhr.²³ And it was Niebuhr who accused Barth of being morally irrelevant in the political and social sphere - which, in Niebuhr's view, amounted to an almost total irrelevance.²⁴ Corporate self-deception formed a central concept in Niebuhr's

Versuch, ihn zu verstehen/Christus und Adam nach Röm 5: zwei theologische Studien (Zürich: EVZ-Verlag, 1964), p 5).

²³ R.Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, ²1960 (1932)); *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (London: Nisbet, 1941 and 1943). As previously noted, I am indebted to A.C.Thiselton for originally drawing my attention to this theologian and to his significance for contemporary theology (Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, pp 137-144).

²⁴ See J.Bettis, 'Political Theology and Social Ethics' in G. Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p 172 (171-9), referring to Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Barth's

program of relating theology to political or social responsibility; specifically, the problem of corporate self-deception in society is equivalent to the Christian concept of sin.²⁵ But in his theology at least Barth would refuse to engage at a primary level with the problems of the social and political sphere, and preferred to ground theology and Christian faith and witness in something above and beyond such problems (which Niebuhr called 'Barth's above the battle Christian witness').²⁶

I will return in my next chapter to the specific issue of Barth's relation to Niebuhr. But for the moment I will note more generally that Niebuhr's understanding of Barth belongs to a fairly common tendency, by which Barth is seen as a theologian who is trying to secure a place for Christian faith above and beyond the sphere of secularity which characterises the modern world - but at the price of irrelevance to the real concerns of this world. Such an understanding is exemplified in Roberts' essay, itself sharply critical of Barth along these lines.²⁷ In an essay which was written at least partly in response to this, Ingolf Dalferth has given us a much richer and more credible account of Barth theology, under the title of 'Karl Barth's Eschatological Realism'.²⁸ This essay argues that Barth's theology is not intended to be a flight from the modern world or modern world-view, but is rather an attempt to re-interpret that modern world-view from within the special perspective of the

East German Letter', *The Christian Century* 76 (Feb 11, 1959), pp 167-8; also 'The Quality of Our Lives', *The Christian Century* 77 (May 11, 1960), pp 568-572; 'Toward New Intra-Christian Endeavours', *The Christian Century* 86 (Dec 31, 1969), pp 1662-1667 (the latter containing a retraction on the part of Niebuhr); see also 'Karl Barth's Own Words: excerpts from the Swiss Theologian's letter to an East German Pastor', *The Christian Century* 76 (March 25, 1959), pp 352-355.

²⁵ Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, p 139.

²⁶ Niebuhr, 'Barth's East German Letter', p 167. For an accurate summary of Niebuhr's general attitude towards Barth, see M.Lovatt, *Confronting the Will-to-Power: a Reconsideration of the Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001), pp 62-71.

²⁷ R.Roberts, 'Barth's Doctrine of Time: its Nature and Implications' in S.W.Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp 88-146, esp. p 145: 'Through a profound ontological exclusiveness, Barth has attempted to preserve Christian theology from the indifference and hostility of a secular world. The triumphalist aggrandizement of his theology was made at the risk of a total disjunction and alienation of his theology from natural reality.'

²⁸ This essay appears in S.W.Sykes (ed.), *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp 14-45; note esp. p 30.

Christian faith. The contemporary world and its concerns are not bypassed but are taken up into this special perspective of the faith and proclamation of the Christian Church.

Hans Frei takes a very similar approach to that of Dalferth in his analysis of Barth's theology,²⁹ and George Hunsinger develops this approach further along the same lines.³⁰ However, in my view Hunsinger moves closer to Barth's theological intention in that he emphasises most of all the centrality of Christ rather than the faith and proclamation of the Christian Church. But, in spite of different emphases, these writers (Dalferth, Frei, Hunsinger) are successful in showing how Barth's 'christocentrism' and uncompromising emphasis on the self-revelation of God in Christ does not in any way lead to an irrelevance to real world concerns. The uniqueness and centrality of Christ operates not restrictively but flexibly and creatively - so that whether we are concerned with existential fulfilment, social and political issues, interfaith dialogue, or whatever, Christian thought is open on the one hand to enrichment and, on the other, to relevant, constructive criticism, all by means of a focus on the uniqueness and finality of Christ as Barth conceived it.

However, all this still leads to a collision with my way of reading Barth. These writers would, I suppose, argue that I have given a priority to the problem of the social structure of sin which was not really there in Barth. In my reading, a particular type of social problem (viz. corporate self-deception) virtually gives a prior ground for Barth's christological concentration. It acquires a constitutive and determinative position which in Barth's theology belongs to Christ alone. To be sure, the problem of sin-as-collective-self-deception is something which can be taken up into Barth's theological approach, provided that it receive critical re-definition through a specific focus on Christ. But in my reading it seems to acquire a fixed position which again raises the question as to whether I am reading Niebuhr into Barth.

²⁹ H.Frei, 'Five Types of Theology' in *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp 28-55 (see esp. p 43).

³⁰ i.e. in *How to Read Karl Barth*.

I think I would best explain my stubbornness on this point by looking closely at the issue of ‘dialectic’, which has long been used as a way of understanding Barth’s earlier theology; but more recently it has been argued with considerable success that dialectic remains a permanent feature of Barth’s theological approach throughout his theological development.³¹ Essentially, Barth’s dialectic is a theological dialectic of revelation; it means that in his revelation God unveils himself only by simultaneously veiling himself.³² This rather cryptic statement can, without too much difficulty, be understood in more concrete terms: the point is that God can only reveal himself through a worldly medium, i.e. through what is immediately accessible in the human sphere - the ‘human sphere’ including religious experience, church institutions, or general rational and ethical concepts. And yet, God’s revelation must not be identified with these various things accessible within the human sphere, for that would eliminate the difference between divine and human. And so there emerges a dialectic of veiling and unveiling; God does reveal himself through the human, worldly medium but, at the same time, he maintains a critical distance from it. And so, if we apply this to the issues of the political and social

³¹ That is, as an argument against the position initiated by H. von Balthasar (in *The Theology of Karl Barth* (New York/Chicago/San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971)) that Barth turned from ‘dialectic to analogy’ at some point between the 2nd ed. of *Romans* and his *Church Dogmatics*. The more recent position has been that dialectic and analogy were permanent features of Barth’s theology from the beginning, and that Barth’s concept of analogy as ‘analogy of faith’ (CD I/1, pp 243-4) is an inherently dialectical concept. This position was first set out most consistently by Ingrid Spieckermann (*Gotteserkenntnis: ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1985)), but was developed by B.McCormack in *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, who has sharpened the general thesis by reconsidering the rôle played by Barth’s book on Anselm (*Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (London: SCM Press, 1960)), and has also done the service of bringing the new paradigm into Anglo-American scholarship. I think it appropriate to mention at this point the new introduction of Barth’s thought provided by J.Webster (*Barth* (London/New York: Continuum, 2000)). Webster justifies the writing of a new introduction to Barth, amongst other reasons, on the grounds that questions have been raised in recent scholarship about the traditional distinction between an early and late Barth (p ix). However, when we turn to the main body of the book we find that Webster’s own emphasis is on the fact that the early Barth had begun to develop a ‘positive content’ of theology which qualifies the seemingly ‘dialectical’ thrust of his early theology (pp 22f). I mention this because my own understanding runs in the opposite direction: for me, the point is that the critical tension of dialectic found in his early work is still (if not all the more) present in his later work, and the seemingly ‘positive content’ of his later work must be seen in this light.

³² e.g. CD I/1, pp 165f; CD IV/2, pp 286-7.

sphere or problem of collective self-deception, then the problem with my approach can be formulated thus: God may reveal himself and his will to us through the problems of social and political self-deception; but as soon as this becomes a fixed means of grasping what is involved in God's revelation, then that same revelation has to maintain critical distance and be critical of my tendency to allow such 'problems' to set the terms for what is meant by revelation or God's will. This is, I suppose, the point at which my reading would be vulnerable to criticism.

However, at this point I have to say that I believe that the place of sin in Barth's theology has been misconceived. The self-deceptive element within sin, especially as it manifests itself in social and political terms, was not subject to this 'dialectical' reservation in Barth. It is not the case that this element could only be taken up in his theology in so far as it is also subject to basic criticism. Rather, this principle was the ground and basis for this type of dialectic. I will now explain why I think this and, indeed, more exactly what I mean, through a historical comment on the emergence of Barth's theology.

The question of sin in the emergence of Barth's theology

It seems to be generally agreed that the significant event in Barth's life which gave rise to his distinctive theology was his inner disturbance over the fact that his former theological colleagues and mentors had given their explicit support to the German war effort.³³ Barth himself strongly disagreed with this move, because he saw the German war involvement as utterly sinful; he believed that the war was due to the sinful self-interests of both or all sides involved in the war. Barth was especially disturbed by the fact that in this situation Christian theology functioned so effectively as legitimation for a sinful war policy. In particular, Barth was disturbed by how this tendency seemed integrally related to the theological approach of W.Herrmann, who had been Barth's main theological influence

³³ This general point has been challenged by Wilfried Härle, in his article entitled 'Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie' (Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche 72 (1975), pp 207-224). I believe Härle is right to point out certain pre-war anticipations of Barth's distinctive theology and break with Liberal theology (as I will show in some detail, especially in my final chapter); however I am in agreement with McCormack that Härle has overstated his case (Dialectical Theology, p 79).

up to that time. The difficulty was - Herrmann sought to ground theology in the inner experience of the Christian. But then, what answer was there to the German Christians who said that they had an 'inner experience' of the war as a just or even a holy war? It is surely clear that here we have the building blocks of Barth's later theological development, in which he sought to develop an antithesis between what is naturally accessible in human experience on the one hand and the true ground of theology on the other.³⁴

However, what is perhaps not so easy to understand is a further transitional step, which had to occur before even the earliest form of Barth's distinctive theology would emerge. The step was his refusal to identify God's action in the world not only with activity which was obviously sinful and destructive, namely war, but also with activity which seemed to Barth to be constructive - that is, socialist activity. Barth had been closely involved with Christian socialism in Switzerland, but distanced himself from it when he saw that it had a tendency to identify strands of the socialist movement with the kingdom or action of God. But why refuse to identify the action of God with any human activity, even when it is good and salutary? The answer I would suggest is that Barth's experiences showed him how human action can seem good when it is in fact evil. What must have overshadowed Barth's thinking about the relation between God and the world from now on was how natural it seemed to the Christians in Germany to equate the human sinful actions of the German war effort with the will of God himself. The situation demonstrated in a very

³⁴ McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, p 113; Karl Barth-Martin Rade: *ein Briefwechsel* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlaghaus Gerd Mohn, 1981), p 115. In this connection, it is worth quoting at length the following passage from one of Barth's sermons of 1914: 'But now someone will say: yes, the war is horrible, but yet it is of God if it is a matter of a just cause. For God helps those who are in the right. Yes, in this way people seek to excuse themselves....As far back as one can think, self-seeking and pride on both sides have been the cause in every war...That is very clear in the present war...One will finally only be able to say: among the peoples of Europe at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries there was an immense ambition, a jealousy and a pride without equal...and therefore they armed themselves against one another to the point of insanity, and therefore this world war finally had to erupt. Of a just cause on either side there can honestly be no talk...All of these things are completely alien to the innermost being of God. And if they nevertheless take place, then there is only one explanation for it: the innermost being of God is also completely alien to humankind.' Cited in McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 114-5 - emphasis mine, referring to Barth, *Predigten 1914* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), pp 463-5.

dramatic and sinister way how Christian theology and Christian belief can be caught up in the problem that people can deceive themselves into thinking that evil actions are good or at least necessary for the greater good. In response to this, Barth came to the view that no human activity should be considered in itself good and willed by God; God's will must be considered as a critical principle over against what seems to be 'good' human action (religion, socialism, reform etc.); even the best human action must be open to being exposed as being (at least in part) evil masquerading as good.³⁵

³⁵ There are two closely related passages in which Barth explains how the First World War demonstrated that what appears to be scholarly, cultured ethical reflection can actually be a mask for ethical self-justification. One of these passages appears in Barth's lectures of 1928, where he is commenting on the general ethical question formulated simply as 'What ought we to do?' ('Was sollen wir tun?'): 'Especially in times of a strong and definite cultural will, as in the period from the beginning of the century to the first world war and well into the war itself, ethical reflection can easily not be meant very seriously in the sense that in it - one has only to think of the products of war theologians of all countries - the content of the imperative that is apparently sought is fixed from the very outset in the form of specific practices whose goodness is no longer open to discussion, being known only too well, so that the factual result of ethical reflection is obviously the ethical justifying of a more or less compact: "This is what we do." [Das wollen wir tun.]' (Barth, *Ethics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), p 68.) The other passage (or passages) is found in an address of 1922 ('The Problem of Ethics Today' in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), pp 143-6 (136-182)): 'To come down to facts, the peculiarity of our time is that, in much greater measure than the time preceding, it presents the problem of ethics as a real concern, that is, as a true problem.' (p 143.) '[O]ne cannot possibly avoid thinking that we face it in a more perplexed, embarrassed and uncertain way than the generation of 1914 did.' (p 144.) 'There was a time [i.e. before 1914] when the ethical problem...was the kind ordinarily called academic. Whatever pessimists, grumblers, literati and other excited ones might find objectionable...here was yet a human culture building itself up in orderly fashion in politics, economics and science, theoretical and applied, progressing steadily along its whole front, interpreted and ennobled by art, and through its morality and religion reaching well beyond itself toward yet better days...Fundamentally, it was a matter not of asking what to do, as if that were not known.' (p 145.) '[I]n what...recognised ethics of those days do we find the question, What ought we to do? [Was sollen wir tun?] leading up to anything but an almost perfectly obvious answer, We ought to do this [Das wollen wir tun] - something which, in the state, in society, or in the church, was already being done...?' (pp 145-6.) I believe these passages set the scene for how the First World War awakened Barth to the problem of corporate self-deception (viz. ethics as a form of corporate/cultural self-justification). When we bear in mind that these passages are commenting on the question 'Was sollen wir tun?', then it can be demonstrated with reasonable certainty that there is a close link between these passages and Barth's departure from religious socialism. For, as McCormack relates,

I find that all of this leads me, at least provisionally, to the conclusion that we are unlikely to be right if we read Barth's theology as if his theocentric or christocentric concentration gave a secondary and non-constitutive rôle to the social and political problems connected with human evil. To put it another way, I think it wrong to say that Barth in no way makes a theological criterion of what is generally accessible to human experience. It is a common feature of human experience, and something genuinely accessible to human knowledge as such, that human evil is self-deceptive; that is, human evil conceals and perpetuates itself through distorted representations of what is good and evil, of where the real dividing line between good and evil lies. Indeed, this is the most virulent form of evil, operating like a cancer, because it turns even the best of intentions into a force for evil. Thus, it can be counterproductive in the fight against evil to appeal to the common conscience and to people's natural sense of wrong and right; this is to do the enemy's work. Rather, our first line of attack must be against people's natural sense of wrong and right. And so, although this responsibility is grounded in a generally accessible truth about the nature of evil (i.e. that it is self-deceptive), it comes to fight against what seem to be generally accessible truths about the nature of evil.

The ground of Barth's dialectic of revelation

I have reiterated all this to show why I believe that the principle which underlies Barth's dialectic of revelation is already present in a relative way in something which is generally accessible to human knowledge quite apart from God. The real and primary reason why God's revelation has to undergo a dialectic of veiling and unveiling is not because of

Barth departed from religious socialism on account of his disillusionment with a particular religious socialist, namely L. Ragaz, who also believed he had direct, straightforward answers to the question 'Was sollen wir tun?' - and the above quotations show that this was precisely Barth's problem with the Germany of the First World War. (See McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 122-130; compare also 'The Righteousness of God' in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, p 16 (9-27).) In sum, Barth's disillusionment with socialist ethics is almost certainly related to the impact of the First World War on his thinking. We should also note that McCormack dates the emergence of Barth's distinctive theocentric theology from this point (i.e. his disillusionment with religious socialism in the person of Ragaz).

some abstract distance between God and man (finite/infinite,³⁶ time/eternity)³⁷ but for the specific and concrete reason of human sin: to identify God's revelation with anything familiar or accessible within human experience would mean that God's revelation is compromised with the very sin from which it is intended to save us. It is for this reason that God's revelation must maintain a critical distance from the very forms through which God chooses to reveal himself - because however fitting something might seem to us to be a vehicle of divine revelation, it might always in fact be evil masquerading as good. But, my main point is this: the principle which underlies this is accessible to human understanding quite apart from God i.e. the principle that evil engages in deliberate misrepresentations of its own nature.

For me, Barth's peculiar stature is that he was able to bring a general awareness of the self-deceptive character of human evil into the particular context and sphere of Christian theology - that is, he addressed the problem that the self-deceptive character of sin infects the very categories and thought forms which the Christian must use to express his/her faith in a scientific or even intelligible manner. He addressed the problem that it infects those truths which are held to be self-evident by even or especially the most cultured and religious members of society. The question which Barth's theology is intended to answer is - given that sin is of such a nature and of such a power, what does it mean to say that God forgives us, heals us, guides and leads us from sin? What does it mean to say that he does this for us in Christ? But the fact that sin or human evil is of such a nature is knowable through generally valid arguments, and Barth does not try to see beyond this; this consideration is effectively exempt from Barth's polemic against generally valid categories of thought and knowledge.

³⁶ cf CD I/1, p 407, where Barth prefers the expression *homo peccator non capax verbi divini* to the more abstract *finitum non capax infiniti* (also pp 220-1).

³⁷ cf McCormack's statement, drawing on Beintker, that the 'dialectic of time and eternity [in Romans, 2nd ed] is employed as a conceptual apparatus for bearing witness to what is in fact a soteriological theme' (Dialectical Theology, p 12; M.Beintker, *Die Dialektik in der 'dialektischen Theologie' Karl Barths* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1987)). In general, I think it a mistake to read the 'time-eternity' distinction as the primary feature of Barth's Romans, and unfortunately this mistake underlies Jenson's reading (God after God: the God of the Past and the Future as Seen in the Work of Karl Barth (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp 291-2 - cf Hunsinger, How to Read Karl Barth, pp 17-8, 22, 291 n.5).

In so far as my proposal thus far depends on there being a close relationship between Barth's theology and political or social problems, we can say that the issue has been raised before in *Marquardt's* thesis and in the controversy he has provoked.³⁸ Certainly, the general idea that Barth's theology was closely related to problems and issues drawn from the social/political sphere, and, in a real sense, actually grounded in them - is obviously very congenial to my thesis. And yet - it seems to me that even though this general issue has been raised, yet no-one has yet been concerned specifically with the rôle of sin in Barth's theology, as something which manifests itself in the social/political sphere. At any rate, I do not think I have seen this approach in the main strands of scholarship on Barth. In fact, there is if anything a reverse emphasis: 'sin' as such emphatically does not appear to play a constitutive rôle in presentations of Barth's theology; it appears as one among other theological concepts which are made relative and secondary in the light of Christ.³⁹

Of course, the writers concerned could point to explicit statements in the Dogmatics, where Barth states that sin can only be understood in the light of Christ.⁴⁰ And so, it would seem, if Barth sometimes appears to rely on a generally intelligible aspect of sin (i.e. that it is self-deceptive), this should be understood in the context of these more central theological statements. And so, this is why I have made use of a conceptual clarification, to show that these (supposedly) more central statements need not be based on a prior conviction that all theology must be undertaken on the basis of Christ alone - rather, such statements can be based on a characteristic of sin itself. That is, the self-

³⁸ See F.-W. Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (Münich: Chr. Kaiser-Verlag, 1985 (1972)); G. Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*. For a recent detailed elaboration of Marquardt's approach, see T. Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁹ e.g. especially Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, pp 160-1, but also, even more notably, E. Jüngel, who in his systematic work (understood as a development of Barth's theology) sees sin as a derivative of the concept of 'nothingness', and in turn sees the concept of 'nothingness' as a derivative of the Trinity (God as the Mystery of the World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), p 225, n. 73). Thus 'sin' appears to be doubly derivative of a primary aspect of revelation (the Trinity).

⁴⁰ Hunsinger makes reference to CD IV/1, pp 360-1; although I believe that even here Barth's point is that sin distorts the self-knowledge of humanity, for he writes: 'Access to the knowledge that he [man] is a sinner is lacking to man because he is a sinner.'

deceptive character of sin means that its true character can only be grasped where sin is dealt with; and, because it is dealt with in Christ according to the understanding of the Christian faith, there arises consequently the theological position that sin can only be grasped on the basis of Christ. Hence, although Barth does state that the truth about sin can only be known through Christ, I do not believe this undermines my thesis that it is his view of the self-deceptive character of sin which underlies his 'dialectic' of revelation.

However, I would freely admit that my proposed way of understanding the Church Dogmatics or Barth's distinctive theological approach is in no way self-evident. I recognise how easy it is, with a writer as prolific and subtle as Barth, to label certain passages as 'particularly illuminating' and then to proceed to interpret all of Barth's theology on the basis of a few, selected passages - all the while giving insufficient attention to other texts which seem to say different or even opposite things.⁴¹ In the present case, there are passages which seem to say that the problem of sin determines the development of his christocentric theology, but there are other passages which seem to say that sin can only be viewed retrospectively from the perspective of a fully developed christocentric theology (that is, sin can only be understood in the light of Christ). More to the point for this thesis and for Christ and Adam, we can see that over against the passages where the problem of sin seems to determine Barth's christology, there are other passages where Barth's christology seems to relate to the original created goodness of humanity, untouched by sin. These latter passages suggest that Barth's christology transcends the question of sin and the need for redemption from sin, and hence also seem contrary to those passages - on which I am relying - where the problem of sin appears determinative for Barth's christology. But in view of this variety, how does anyone ensure that they are not being selective in their reading of Barth, and that the appropriate balance between the different kinds of statements has been maintained?⁴²

⁴¹ 'As with (for example) Aquinas and Calvin, so with Barth: the interpretation of a corpus of such range and depth is particularly exposed to being skewed by selection and partiality...and by over-eagerness to make constructive use of ill-digested accounts of some or other of their preoccupations.' (Webster, Barth, p 168.)

⁴² I find P.Schempp's comments relevant to this point: '[B]ecause of the wide radius of Barth's theology, it would be a miracle if almost every theologian could not count off a few points at which he could triumphantly say "That is what I have already 'advocated' for a long time"...It would also be a

In view of this problem, I have made use of a comment on the life-setting of Barth's theology, to attempt to make concrete sense of his more abstract statements and, more importantly, to try to identify the concrete principles or struggles which underlie the seemingly disparate statements. In particular, the background of Barth's theology in the crisis of the social upheavals and mass destruction of the First World War gives plausibility to my program of giving emphasis to his statements on sin, and of relating these specifically to socio-political issues. However, in itself this only lends plausibility to my program; this starting point must be given confirmation in Barth's own words and lines of argument.

It is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an argument based on all of Barth's theological output or on all of the Dogmatics. Rather, my method will be to take examples of both kinds of seemingly disparate statements on the subject of sin and show how they are structurally related in specific instances. It will be seen as we proceed that both kinds of statements appear in Christ and Adam, and so part of my task will be to show how they are related in this essay. However, when I turn to the actual content of Christ and Adam in my next chapter, I will not initially make this question an explicit theme, but will return to this question once my analysis is basically complete, and will then seek to demonstrate that my presuppositions in reading Barth are justified in the course of my analysis.

miracle if each one could not also think he finds in Barth his own foe...' ('Marginal Glosses on Barthianism' in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 193 (191-200)).

Chapter Three - Barth's Exegesis of Romans 5

Introduction

Barth's exegesis of Romans 5, as it appears in his small book *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5*, is introduced to us by British Barthians T.F.Torrance and J.K.S.Reid as a 'striking piece of theological exegesis', and, more positively, as a 'penetrating account of the Biblical and Christian doctrine of man'.¹ Yet this same exegesis Käsemann calls 'grotesque',² Bultmann calls a 'forced interpretation',³ and Jüngel refers to as 'eigenwillig'.⁴ It has also received detailed criticism from the conservative theologian John Murray along the same lines, judging its main points to be 'extraneous and alien to the emphasis of the passage'.⁵ More or less the same point is made by Brandenburger in his full length study on the passage.⁶

No doubt each of these theologians approach the passage with their own theological perspective, perspectives which differ from that of Barth - and hence one might expect differences from Barth in their exegesis. However these are very similar testimonies coming from different theologians. Hence the difficulty does not seem to be one of theological perspective. And these very different theologians all seem to be accusing Barth of 'eisegesis', of reading things into the passage; altogether, this raises the suspicion that Barth has violated the actual content of the text itself, and that in a particularly obvious way. And the fact that one of these theologians - Eberhard Jüngel - is known to be very close to Barth as a theologian, surely reinforces my point, for if a theologian who is close to Barth rejects his exegesis as forced and unreasonable, there is probably

¹ Editors' Foreword of *Christ and Adam*.

² E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1980), p 143.

³ 'Adam and Christ according to Romans 5' in Klassen/Snyder (ed.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1962), p 163 (143-165).

⁴ 'Das Gesetz zwischen Adam und Christus: eine theologische Studie zu Röm 5, 12-21' in E.Jüngel, *Unterwegs zur Sache* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1972), p 147 (145-72).

⁵ *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott; 1967), p 390 (Volume I).

⁶ *Adam und Christus. Exegetisch-religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu Röm 5,12-21 (1 Kor 15)* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1962), p 278.

something in the criticism. Notably, Jüngel even makes a sympathetic reference to the theology of Christ and Adam in his book entitled *Karl Barth: a Theological Legacy*, which makes it all the more striking that he nevertheless thinks very little of the exegesis which supposedly underlies this theology.⁷

My point is also reinforced, albeit indirectly, by Charles Cranfield's uncritical support of Barth's position.⁸ This is because Cranfield's support does not seem to be well integrated into the main body of his exegesis; Cranfield does not appear to be either defending or expounding the actual details of Barth's exegesis, and this leaves one with the impression of a general theological loyalty on Cranfield's part rather than with an impression that Barth's exegesis has actually measured up to scholarly critical exegesis.⁹

All in all, this brief review of responses to Christ and Adam bears witness to the general problems of Barth's exegesis, which I wrote about in my first chapter: the problem is that Barth seems to engage in unconvincing and unnatural exegesis, specifically by forcing his prior dogmatic conclusions onto the text. I think that it will become apparent why Barth's exegesis of our passage seems so unnatural to such differing theologians as we turn from this cloud of contrary witnesses to a summary of what his exegesis actually contains.

Barth's exegesis: general features

In my thesis I am mainly concerned with the exegesis of the second part of Romans 5, verses 12-21. And indeed what Barth has to say seems to concern chiefly this second part. This is shown by the title itself, *Christ and Adam*; for plainly the Christ-Adam or Adam-Christ parallel appears explicitly only in this second part, vv 12-21. But also, it is

⁷ *Karl Barth: a Theological Legacy*, p 50.

⁸ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans Volume I* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), pp 294-5; 269.

⁹ See J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, p 43, who identifies Cranfield and Barrett as exegetes who are influenced by loyalty to Barth, in connection with passages relating to natural theology. In the present passage, Barrett's exegesis seems to be more influenced by Barth's earlier exegesis in *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., than by the exegesis under consideration here (C.K.Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: A&C Black, 2nd 1991 (1957)), p 109).

shown by the relative amount of space and attention to textual detail which Barth expends on this second part.¹⁰ So I will begin with a brief outline of the content of these verses, Romans 5:12-21.

As already indicated, this passage seems to concern a parallel between Adam and Christ. Adam's one act of disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit brings sin and death to many; similarly, Christ's act of obedience in taking up the cross brings righteousness and life to many. It would seem that Paul wishes to bring out the parallel between these two states of affairs - that in both cases the situation, condition or fate of the many is determined by the action of the one. Barth notes that this parallel forms a crucial aspect of our passage. ('This parallel must first be seen as such. In both cases there is the one, and in both, the many, all men.')

¹¹

And yet, before noting this surely very obvious point, it becomes clear that Barth wishes to argue that the real point of the passage is not the parallel between Adam and Christ, but rather the paradigmatic priority of Christ over Adam. If I understand the drift of Barth's arguments correctly, I think he means that when people read 5:12-21, they assume that Adam is the head of humanity as a whole and Christ is the head only of Christians. Barth wishes to argue, on the contrary, that Christ rather than Adam is the head of the original humanity. This is expressed in the following terms: 'Man's essential and original nature is to be found...not in Adam but in Christ. In Adam we can only find it prefigured. Adam can therefore be interpreted only in the light of Christ and not the other way round.'¹² Here it can be seen very clearly that the order of the title, Christ and Adam, is plainly deliberate, and indeed, programmatic.

¹⁰ Further, in Barth's *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1959), he refers the reader to Christ and Adam at the beginning of his exposition of 5:12-21, and not at the beginning of his exposition of chapter 5 as a whole (p 61).

¹¹ Christ and Adam, p 7. I should note at this point that Smail's translation, which I have used, is clearly a paraphrase of the original; however, I think his translation sufficiently represents Barth's meaning for my purposes - with one very important exception which I will mention below. The original from which page references are taken is Rudolf Bultmann: *ein Versuch, ihn zu verstehen/Christus und Adam nach Röm 5: zwei theologische Studien* (i.e. the 1964 edition).

¹² Christ and Adam, p 6.

And so, we have here Barth's central conclusion that Christ, rather than Adam, represents the original nature of man, and as we proceed to analyse Barth's exegesis in more detail we will find the basic point expressed in different forms - e.g. that Christ is original and Adam derived or copy, that Christ and not Adam is the head of all of humanity, and that Christ is the primary anthropological ordering principle, and Adam the secondary, and so on. We will, of course, need to take a closer look at what exactly, in concrete terms, is meant by these statements. But first I would like to make a more detailed examination of how Barth believes he can derive them from the text itself.

Barth's exegesis: specific features

Arguably, the strangest and seemingly most indefensible aspect of Barth's exegesis is his sustained conclusion that it is not Adam, but Christ, who truly stands at the head of all of humanity. The relationship which all of humanity sustains to Adam is truly and rightly understood only in terms of their more original relation to Christ.¹³

Barth does not seem to mean simply that it is Christ and not Adam to whom all men are related as their representative. Rather, he seems to be saying that Adam is the representative of all of humanity, but only by virtue of the fact that Christ is also the representative of humanity; the relation of all men to Adam is derived from and is dependent on their more original and primary relation to Christ. The relationship of the one to the many in Adam does exist, but only because the relation of the one to the many in Christ exists.

Barth supports this thesis, which in any case does not appear to have very much meaning, by a number of exegetical points which seem in themselves to be very strained and artificial.

¹³ Christ and Adam, pp 9-10.

The relationship of 5:12-21 to 5:1-11

One of the most important aspects of Barth's supporting arguments is the way he relates the first and second halves of Romans 5 to each other. However, I have to confess here that I find Barth's exegesis so bizarre at this point that it is very difficult, and perhaps impossible, to give a clear and perspicuous summary of his arguments. I think, however, that it is possible to pick out the following point: it would appear to any casual reader of vv 12-21 that Paul has a basically antithetical parallel in mind, that in the Adam-sphere we have sin and the consequent death, but in the Christ-sphere we have righteousness and the consequent life etc. And yet, Barth challenges this natural assumption, and claims that the two spheres are not as antithetical as they seem. Specifically, although the Adam side seems to be simply negative and centred on 'damnation', nevertheless Christ as Saviour is actually present even on the Adam side, albeit in a hidden way. Thus even in the state of sin (i.e. 'Adam') humanity is already included in the (positive, life-centred) sphere of Christ's salvation.

Now, Barth argues this by relating the two parts of Romans 5 in a particular way. That is, he takes Paul's statement in v 8 that 'Christ died for us while we were yet sinners' to mean that even in the state of sin we are already included in the sphere of Christ; he then reads this into vv 12-21, and thus states that even when we were sinners in Adam we were already included in the sphere of salvation/Christ.¹⁴

I do not think it necessary to argue in detail that the two parts of Romans 5 are not related in this way. But I think it is probably important to identify how this is related to Barth's central conclusion, namely that Christ is the original head of humanity and Adam is only copy or derivative. From what I can make out, the issue for Barth is as follows: he wants to deny to 'Adam' any independent reality over against or prior to Christ. For if Adam has an independent sphere prior to Christ, then it might appear that Christ and his salvation would have to fit into the existing order already laid down by Adam; but if Barth can argue that Adam has no such independent reality over against Christ, and that Christ's saving activity is already present in the sphere of Adam, then it can (somehow)

¹⁴ Christ and Adam, p 5; see also p 17.

be argued that Christ is the original to which Adam's reality has to adapt itself. In the first case, Adam would be the head of the original humanity, and Christ the derivative; in the second case, which Barth endorses, Christ would be the original and Adam the derivative. Or so I understand the drift of Barth's arguments.

However, as a general comment, I would say that the exegetical basis is extremely weak at this point, for we surely cannot admit that Barth has given us any reason to conclude that Christ as Saviour is present in a hidden way on the 'Adam side'. Indeed, Barth's arguments at this point seem to me to be verging on the nonsensical.

Adam as a type of Christ

Barth takes note of an expression Paul uses in v 14, that Adam is a type (τύπος) of the one who is to come - undoubtedly the 'one to come' being Christ. Barth reads 'type' as meaning something like copy, and hence understands our relationship to Adam as only a copy of our relationship to Christ. Again we have the conclusion, that our relationship to Adam is derivative of our relationship to Christ: 'the relationship between Adam and us reveals not the primary but only the secondary anthropological truth and ordering principle. The primary anthropological truth and ordering principle, which only mirrors itself in that relationship, is made clear only through the relationship between Christ and us.'¹⁵

But, surely, it seems perfectly natural, indeed more natural, to take the expression 'type' in such a way as to see our respective relationships with Adam and with Christ as standing over against each other; they resemble each other and illuminate each other. There seems to be no reason to see this word 'τύπος' as establishing some kind of priority in this resemblance; the use of 'τύπος' implies that Adam resembles Christ in his relation as one to the many, but does not imply that Adam is 'only' resemblance and Christ the original.¹⁶

¹⁵ Christ and Adam, p 6.

¹⁶ So Murray: 'Paul's teaching in this passage does not establish the primacy or priority which Barth claims for the relationship to Christ. Adam could be the type of Christ, as Paul says, without drawing all

The dissimilarity between the trespass of Adam and the gift of salvation in Christ

Barth also takes note of the fact that Paul wishes to qualify the parallel between Adam and Christ by saying that the salvation which comes through Christ is much greater than the condemnation which comes through Adam. It comes perhaps as no surprise that Barth interprets this as establishing the priority of the relationship of men to Christ over their relationship to Adam. Whether or not this is a correct interpretation is another matter.

Barth is quite possibly correct in saying that Paul is arguing in v 15 that the gift of salvation is greater than Adam's trespass because on the side of the gift God is involved; whereas on the side of the trespass it is only a man who is involved.¹⁷ Barth also seems to get it right when he says (or so I suppose he is saying) that the greatness of God's gift is seen in the fact that it doesn't simply provide a neutral alternative to sin, but actually defeats sin or brings pardon for sin when sin has already arrived on the scene.¹⁸ But what is so very strange in Barth's exegesis is that he seems to think that this very real superiority and superior power of grace over sin somehow entails a kind of logical superiority, so that our relationship to Adam is logically dependent on our relationship to Christ.

This non sequitur of reasoning is most plainly illustrated in two sentences found on page 12 of *Christ and Adam*, with the words: 'Paul is not denying that Adam's sin still brings

the inferences which Barth elicits from this relationship. All that could feasibly be derived from the typological datum mentioned in verse 14 and applied expressly in the succeeding verses is simply that there is an analogy between our relation to Adam in the realm of sin and death and our relation to Christ in the realm of righteousness and life. In the absence of additional data it is an importation, adopted on our own responsibility, to infer more.' (*The Epistle to the Romans*, p 388 (Volume I).) Bultmann even goes so far, however, as to infer the opposite to Barth, by translating thus: 'the prototype of the coming (Adam)' - which gives the priority to the relationship of Adam to all men over that of Christ. ('*Adam and Christ*', p 163.) Whether or not this is correct, it at least illustrates that the resemblance between the two relations is reversible.

¹⁷ *Christ and Adam*, p 10.

¹⁸ *Christ and Adam*, pp 12-3.

death to all men, but he is affirming that the grace of Christ has an incomparably greater power to make these dead men alive' - so much we can understand, so much we can even accept. But the next sentence reads 'He [Paul] is not saying that there is no truth in Adam, but he is saying that it is a subordinate truth that depends for its validity on its correspondence with the final truth that is in Christ'. Now - we can say that we are dependent as human beings on our relation to Christ because of our relation to Adam - we need Christ's salvation because we are lost in Adam. But does that mean that the truth that we have this relation to Adam depends for its validity on the truth that we also have a relation to Christ? There seems to be a particularly tortuous confusion between reality and logic at work here.¹⁹

Paul's a fortiori argument

Barth gets into even deeper water in his treatment of Paul's a fortiori argument of vv 15 & 17. He says, rightly, that wherever the expression 'how much more' (πολλῷ μᾶλλον) is used, then we have a situation where the same principle is operative on both sides, but which is for some reason more strongly operative on the second side. An example of this would be: 'if I could drive safely when I'd just passed my test, "how much more" will I be able to when I've got ten years experience behind me'. The difference is not between

¹⁹ These two sentences which we have just considered are actually a single sentence in the original, which Smail has paraphrased as two. The original sentence is as follows: 'Daß die Adamswahrheit vom Sterben aller Menschen in Adams Sünde ausgelöscht und nicht mehr in Betracht zu ziehen sei, wird hier nicht gesagt, wohl aber, daß sie mit der ihr gegenüberstehenden Christuswahrheit von der auf alle diese Gestorbenen überströmenden Gnade nicht zu vergleichen, daß sie unten und diese oben sei, daß sie nur noch überragt und beleuchtet von dieser Geltung haben könne.' (Rudolf Bultmann/Christus und Adam, p 82.) The German here is very difficult, and it is certainly impossible to provide an adequate translation without breaking it up into smaller sentences. However, I think the following would be closer to the original: 'Paul is not saying that the truth of Adam, which concerns the death of all men in Adam's sin, is erased and does not need to be taken into consideration any longer. Rather, Paul is saying that the truth of Adam cannot be compared with the truth of Christ. This is because the truth of Christ which stands over against the truth of Adam concerns the grace which overflows onto all these dead men. Paul is saying that the truth of Adam is below, and the truth of Christ is above, and the truth of Adam can have validity only in so far as it is exceeded and illuminated by the truth of Christ.' I think the confusion between reality and logic is still evident in this translation, in that from the superiority of Christ in actuality (viz. the 'grace which overflows onto all these dead men') Barth seems to infer the superiority of the 'truth' of Christ.

inexperience and experience, but between some experience and more experience: as Barth says, ‘we are dealing with two things that fall under the same ordering principle, which is valid and recognisable in lesser degree on the one side and in greater degree on the other. Since it is already valid and recognisable even on the first side, it must be “all the more” recognisable on the other side as well’.²⁰

Barth infers from this principle that Christ’s saving relationship is already present on the Adam side. The saving relation we sustain to Christ is already present, though in a hidden way, on the Adam side. ‘If the truth in Christ holds good in the dark and alien world of Adam, “how much more” does it hold good in the world of Christ, where it properly and originally belongs!’²¹

Now, it is true that it is not clear what Paul means by the ‘how much more’ expression which he makes use of in vv 15 & 17. How does it follow from the fact that death came to the many from the one, that ‘all the more’ must life come to the many from the one? So far as we can see, the same principle is operative on both sides, namely that the act of the one man pre-determines the fate of the many. So how does it follow that on one side, the side of life, this effect must be greater or more certain?

As I noted above, I think that Barth has already stated the only reasons that are visible in the text: first of all that on the side of life God is involved (v 15), and second that the gift had to surpass the effect of the trespass because the gift came ‘after many trespasses’ and hence it had to nullify the effects of past trespasses as well as bring into effect the future course of righteousness (v 16). Now - we may not think Paul’s reasoning is very good on these points; we may not think Paul states it very clearly, but at least it seems to be present in the text, and gives us *prima facie* reason to suppose that it was what Paul had in mind. But Barth’s contention that Paul presupposed a hidden presence of Christ on the side of Adam - so that we could be all the more sure of his saving presence on the side

²⁰ Christ and Adam, p 19.

²¹ Christ and Adam, p 19.

of the gift, where he is not hidden - this seems to be without any support in the text; there seems to be no reason to think that Paul was thinking along these lines.²²

At any rate, Barth's exegesis seems to be guided here by the presupposition that the 'relation of the one to the many' as it occurs on the Adam-side, has its real and true origin only on the Christ-side, so that even on the Adam-side where this 'one-many relation' is mentioned it has christological and soteriological overtones. The fact that Christ and salvation are not mentioned at all on the Adam side does not mean for Barth that they are not there, but merely that they are hidden. What Barth will not admit is that the 'one-many' relationship - this concept of the one man determining the fate of the many - might actually be a conceptual tool in its own right, with its own compelling clarity, which Paul applies with independently valid force to both the side of Adam and the side of Christ.

Summary of the problems with Barth's exegesis

To complete my summary of Barth's exegesis, I would have to go into his approach to Paul's digression about the Mosaic law in vv 13-14 and v 20;²³ and also his implicit use of the fact that Paul uses the expression 'all (men)' on both sides of the parallel in vv 18-19.²⁴ Suffice to say that I do not find the same severity of exegetical difficulties in his treatment of these verses, although I think it does illustrate the tendency I have found in his exegesis so far. Certainly I don't think we would find a clue to eliminating the problems I have highlighted up till now.

²² Murray is the only one I know of who addresses Barth's reasoning on this point (The Epistle to the Romans, pp 389-90 (Volume I)), but unfortunately I think he misunderstands it; he seems to take Barth to mean that the saving relation which Christ bears to 'all men' follows necessarily from the fact of their relation to Adam. But Barth seems to say almost the opposite, that the relation men bear to Adam follows from their relation to Christ; for example when he says that the truth in Adam is subordinate to and depends for its validity on the truth in Christ (Christ and Adam, p 12).

²³ Christ and Adam, pp 24-41.

²⁴ Christ and Adam, esp. p 42.

I think a fair summary of the problems we have encountered so far would be as follows: Barth persistently questions and interferes with the textual datum which seems to us to be so self-evident, namely that the concept of the relation of the one to the many has an independent validity which allows Paul to apply it with independent force to the cases of Adam and Christ. This is what lies behind the parallel between Adam and Christ; this and this alone makes the parallel intelligible. Yet Barth persistently says that the one-many relation belongs originally to Christ; and hence where it appears in Adam it is a derivative of where it occurs in Christ and hence it always points away from itself to Christ and to his saving truth.

This to me entails a far more serious problem than Barth's more general statement that the truth about humanity, about human nature, is to be found only in Christ and not in Adam, that to 'find the true and essential nature of man we have to look not to Adam the fallen man, but to Christ in whom what has fallen has been cancelled and what was original has been restored'.²⁵ For even if we disagree, it is at least intelligible to say that we can no longer find the true nature of man in Adam, because we know Adam only as fallen man in whom the original image of man has been perverted; we can only see this original image where it has been restored in Christ. Barth could find support for this view by a more or less traditional exegesis of Romans 5:12-21, showing how man as such is fallen by virtue of his relation to Adam, while perhaps laying more emphasis than is usual on the fact that Paul says nothing about an image of Adam or of created man remaining in spite of the fall. This would make sense; the problem only really arises where Barth starts interfering with the concept of the relationship of all men to Adam and reading into it the relationship of all men to Christ.

Thus far I have been playing devil's advocate, and stating as clearly as possible the sort of difficulties I have with Barth's exegesis. These are severe difficulties; indeed Barth's exegesis seems so erratic that it is difficult even to summarise it and to say where the problem lies. But now I will try to examine the issue from another perspective, to see if there is any line of enquiry which might make this exegesis appear more intelligible, or even reasonable and constructive.

²⁵ Christ and Adam, p 24.

General considerations regarding Barth's exegesis: his contrast with Bultmann

Rudolf Bultmann and John Murray each preface their criticisms of Barth's exegesis of Romans 5 with the claim that they have every right to criticise Barth on the basis of exegesis alone, because this is how Barth himself claimed theological issues should be settled.²⁶ From this it would seem that there is nothing to be gained from setting Barth's exegesis in its theological or dogmatic context - the only task is to see whether Barth's exegesis faithfully reflects the actual content of the text.

A broader vision of the task of exegesis appears in a quite different analysis of Barth's exegesis of Romans 5, specifically by the German Catholic scholar, E.H.Friedmann. He understands exegesis more as a dialogue or conversation of theology with the text, so that the results of theological exegesis are not read straight out of the text, but are progressively shaped by the text's own content.²⁷ This is at least closer to what Barth had in mind in his exegesis generally, even though Friedmann for his own (theological) reasons rejects Barth's conclusion about Romans 5.²⁸ We may recall how in his earlier work Barth stated that in all exegesis something has to be read into the text as well as something being read out of the text. The true aim of exegesis is to avoid reading into the text more than one reads out.²⁹ This approach seeks to balance the claims of the text itself with the theological presuppositions and concerns of the interpreter; it is a long way from supposing that the only aim of exegesis is to reproduce the objective content of the text pure and simple.³⁰

²⁶ Bultmann, 'Adam and Christ', p 143; Murray, Epistle to the Romans, p 384 (Volume I).

²⁷ Christologie und Anthropologie: Methode und Bedeutung der Lehre vom Menschen in der Theologie Karl Barths (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1972), p 198.

²⁸ Specifically Friedmann thinks that because Barth derives human nature in general from that of Christ in particular, he is implying that humanity as such is an 'emanation' from God (Christologie und Anthropologie, p 199).

²⁹ The Epistle to the Romans, p ix (Preface to the English Edition).

³⁰ cf also CD I/1, p 16: 'Nor can it ever be the real concern of dogmatics merely to assemble, repeat and define the teaching of the Bible...[D]ogmatics as such does not ask what the apostles and prophets said but what we must say on the basis of the apostles and prophets.'

As it happens, I think it likely that Bultmann's statement to the effect that 'Barth himself asserted that theological issues ought to be settled on the basis of exegesis', is actually an allusion to a certain central aspect of Barth's theology. It is in fact an allusion to a fundamental disagreement between Barth and Bultmann. The issue is not the normativity of Scripture and its exegesis for theology as such; on that they are agreed. But Bultmann grants a rôle to the prior understanding of the human subject in understanding and interpreting Scripture, where Barth believes that Scripture as the specific object of our understanding should always take priority over the general understanding which the human subject brings to it. Writing against Bultmann, Barth claimed that his original theological aim in the 1920's had been

to reverse the current understanding of the New (and the Old) Testament;... understanding in general, man's knowledge, as we saw it, depended on his being known by the object of his knowledge. We were concerned with the Word, God's gift and message to man... Although we did not know the Word, we were seeking to demythologise the belief that man was the measure of his own understanding and of all other understanding.³¹

Barth is lamenting the fact that Bultmann once shared this theological vision, but has now forsaken it with his preoccupation with the prior self-understanding of man.

However I think Bultmann has misunderstood Barth if he thinks that this means that we should seek to abandon all presuppositions when we approach Scripture. On the contrary, Barth is approaching the text with the specific theological presupposition that the Bible must speak against our human presuppositions, that is against our natural understanding, because it is presupposed that the Word of God which we meet in Scripture is intended to liberate us from our self-understanding which has fallen prey to sin.³²

In practice, this means that Barth will never appear at ease with any part of Scripture which seems to connect up smoothly with a general or prior human understanding; we would expect Barth to struggle especially with a text which seems to connect with human

³¹ 'Bultmann - an attempt to understand him' in H.W.Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth: a Theological Debate* (London: SPCK, 1972), p 127 (83-132 - Volume II).

³² 'Bultmann - an attempt to understand him', p 123.

self-understanding, with humanity's understanding of itself. And this is exactly what we find happening in his exposition of Romans 5; for Romans 5 seems to be about the natural or universal condition of man (i.e. as 'fallen'), and here if anywhere we would expect the text to be susceptible to illustrations from common human experience, that is from the normal everyday self-understanding of humanity. Hence, the last thing Barth would rest content with would be a merely formally correct exposition of the text, for that would simply allow human self-understanding to remain untouched or would even cause it to be reinforced; Barth must allow (or force!) the text to speak against this self-understanding. Of course, this does not excuse a formally incorrect or actually forced reading; a theological interpretation must not be based on thoughts which Paul never had. But we must be on our guard against judging Barth's exegesis by the canon of formal correctness, when the aim is not so much formal correctness as bringing out the material tensions between the text and the presuppositions of the modern world.³³

Another piece of the puzzle which goes some way to explaining why Barth interprets Romans 5 as he does, is that he does not think of Scripture itself and as such as the object which must stand as the basic critical corrective to the self-understanding of humanity. Properly speaking, it is Jesus Christ who is this object. We find that Barth summarises his doctrine of Scripture in the *Church Dogmatics* in terms which reinforce what I have said so far about his theology:

Precisely in order that he may really appropriate what Scripture has to say, the reader and hearer must be willing to transpose the centre of attention from himself, from the system of his own concerns and questions (even if he thinks he can give them the character of concerns and questions typical of his whole epoch) to the scriptural word itself. He must allow himself to be lifted out of himself into this word and its concerns and questions.³⁴

³³ cf James M. Robinson's comments on Jülicher's criticism of Barth's (earlier) controversial reading of Romans 9-11 as referring not to Israel but to the Church: 'Jülicher is ... superficial...when he opposes Barth's reading of Paul's comments about Judaism, the Establishment of his day, in terms of the established Christian church today. This is not a slip, an inaccuracy, on Barth's part, but rather the result of the hermeneutical assumption that what was brought to expression in terms of a concrete specific situation by Paul has its equivalent in concrete specific situations today that are not necessarily the same as those to which Paul was referring.' J.M.Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 20-1.

³⁴ CD I/2, p 739.

Barth then completes these reflections with the further, more essential reflection that our act of faith in Scripture takes place ‘not in an abstract confidence in its salutariness as our act, but in a concrete confidence in its object - the object we encounter in the image reflected in Scripture...Jesus Christ is this object’.³⁵

And so - Barth understood scriptural exegesis as a process by which Christ as the object corrects human self-understanding, indeed grounds true human self-understanding in the first place. On this basis we can understand why Barth would read the Adam-Christ parallel of 5:12-21 as meaning that Christ is the measure of Adam, that we can only understand our relation to Adam i.e. the universal condition of humanity, by first attending to our relation to Christ.

This is merely a provisional comment, and in itself merely strengthens the suspicion that Barth is forcibly reading his dogmatic conclusions into the text itself. Still, I do hope to make use of what I have shown so far to exonerate or at least mitigate Barth’s exegesis; but first I will have more to say about the context of his exegesis in his dogmatics.

More about Barth’s protest against Cartesian thought

It will be plain by now that I have come round again to talking of Barth’s protest against Cartesian thought: in effect, Barth believes the subject should not stand back and understand the object in its (the subject’s) own terms; the subject must seek to understand itself ever anew in terms of the object.³⁶ In my second chapter I interpreted

³⁵ CD I/2, p 740.

³⁶ For these ideas, I am specifically drawing on the work of my supervisor R.H.Bell, especially as represented in the following articles: ‘The Subject-Object Relationship in Theology and Physics: A Contribution to the debate as to whether Theology is a Science’ (unpublished paper, 1990); ‘Myths, Metaphors and Models: An Inquiry into the Role of the Person as Subject in Natural Science and Theology’ in N.Gregersen, U.Gorman and W.Drees (ed.), *Studies in Science and Theology* (Denmark: University of Aarhus, 2000), pp 115-136; ‘The Myth of Adam and the Myth of Christ in Romans 5:12-21’ in A.Christophersen, C.Claussen, J.Frey and B.Longenecker (ed.), *Paul, Luke and the Greco-Roman World: Essays in Honour of Alexander J.M. Wedderburn* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp

‘the subject’ as the self-understanding or self-representation of humanity which has fallen prey to sin; and I interpreted the act of God in Christ as the object which redeems this self-representation of humanity from the sin of its collective self-deception.

I argued that because the self-understanding of humanity falls prey to severe sin in this particularly unobtrusive way, then it is very unwise to use this self-understanding of humanity as any kind of preparation for an understanding of redemption in Christ; for in that case the gospel will not be able to provide any liberation from this desperate situation of collective self-deception and may even find itself in the false and dreadful position of reinforcing it. Also, I argued that this is a particular problem in Cartesian thought, which sees what is accepted as self-evident by humanity in general as the only true basis for knowledge; and I interpreted Barth’s protest against the Cartesian subject/object split as an attempt to deal with this problem.

Further, I made some provisional comments on how Barth’s exegesis of Romans 5 may be related to this issue: specifically in the way he contends for a priority of Christ over Adam; and in the way he calls for a special anthropology based on Christ in place of a general anthropology, based on humanity in general. I now wish to show something of how deeply rooted Barth’s exegesis of Romans 5 is in his dogmatics, especially with regard to its anti-Cartesian basis.

First of all, there can be no doubt that the comments on the opening pages of *Christ and Adam*, published in 1952, point back very clearly to the opening pages of the first volume of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, published twenty years earlier in 1932. To show this, we will take the following passage from *Christ and Adam*:

The meaning of the famous parallel (so called) between ‘Adam and Christ’, which now follows, is not that the relationship between Adam and us is the expression of our true and original nature, so that we would have to recognise in Adam the fundamental truth of anthropology to which the subsequent relationship between Christ and us would have to fit and adapt itself. The relationship between Adam and us reveals not the primary but only the secondary anthropological truth and

21-36. See also J.Fischer, ‘Über die Beziehung von Glaube und Mythos’, *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 85 (1988), pp 303-328.

ordering principle. The primary anthropological truth and ordering principle, which only mirrors itself in that relationship, is made clear only through the relationship between Christ and us.³⁷

This passage clearly states the fundamental contention - and, as I have said, the fundamental problem - of Barth's exegesis; but my point here is not to consider the exegetical problem but to show how clearly it is echoed on the opening pages of Barth's Dogmatics. For there Barth opposes what he believes is the post-Enlightenment and Modernist approach, that Christian faith and existence should be interpreted in terms of a prior general anthropology. Barth is opposed to the idea that there is a general anthropology which could provide the criterion for the validity or relevance of theological statements.³⁸ And, as I mentioned in my second chapter, he especially associates this idea with the thinking of Descartes, for it was he who stipulated that what was intelligible or demonstrable to humanity in general should be the prior criterion for all truth.

The same point emerges even more forcefully in Barth's dispute with his former theological ally, Friedrich Gogarten. I am thinking of where this dispute appears in the first volume of the Dogmatics, for there Barth makes it clear that it was his difficulties with Gogarten (and other related difficulties) which motivated him to revise the first volume of his Dogmatics fully.³⁹ Specifically, Barth takes issue with Gogarten's idea of a 'circle' between the doctrine of man and the doctrine of God:

[Quoting Gogarten] "There is no understanding of man without understanding of God, but...again I cannot understand this God without already understanding man" ... If in the last clause Gogarten had written "also" instead of "already," no objection could be taken. The thought would then be that understanding man presupposes understanding God and understanding God always includes understanding man also. But this does not seem to be Gogarten's thought. [If it had been] it [would be] hard to see how one could move on from this to the primacy of anthropology...And Gogarten does in fact write "already." This "already" seems to give the understanding of man priority over

³⁷ Christ and Adam, p 6.

³⁸ CD I/1, pp 36-7.

³⁹ CD I/1, p 125. For the historical/biographical background to this, see Bruce L. McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 401-2; 407-11.

the understanding of God, a priority which for its part seems unthinkable unless one presupposes a “pre-understanding” with regard to man, as Bultmann actually does.⁴⁰

A few pages later, Barth concludes his reflections on Gogarten with the striking words:

Understanding man in the light of God...is an understanding grounded in God's Word and not in the preceding understanding of man. 'From man' can only mean from man of the lost status integritatis and hence from man of the present status corruptionis. Thus to understand God from man is an impossibility, or something one can do only in the form of Christology and not of anthropology (not even a Christology translated into anthropology). There is a way from Christology to anthropology; there is no way from anthropology to Christology.⁴¹

Here we have the building blocks for what Barth would work out much later in more detail, i.e. the priority of Christology over anthropology; that a Christian doctrine of man may be possible, but only on the basis of the humanity of Christ. Also, we see here the crucial importance of the doctrine of the fall of humanity into sin for Barth's theology: we can also see this in the way he opened the first chapter of his dogmatics with the problem of 'talk about God', which is that 'we do not know man i.e. ourselves, as man in his original estate and therefore as the man of the kingdom of glory. Of this man it might be said that all his talk is talk about God. But...we know ourselves only as the man to whom mercy is shown as one who is fallen, lost or condemned'.⁴² General anthropology, or an anthropology based on the self-understanding of man in general, cannot be the basis of a Christian theology, for this would make the distorted, perverted self-understanding of fallen man the criterion of the explication of man's redemption; man needs the application of redemption first to redeem him from the self-understanding which has fallen prey to sin.

Justifying Barth's exegesis: provisional considerations

I hope I have shown that Barth's emphasis on the priority of Christology over anthropology, as it appears in Christ and Adam, is deeply rooted in Barth's theology and

⁴⁰ CD I/1, p 129.

⁴¹ CD I/1, p 131.

⁴² CD I/1, p 47.

dogmatics, and this can be traced back to his concern with the influence of Descartes and the consequent ‘turn to anthropology’ in modern thought. Now I will turn to look at how this may help us understand provisionally what is happening in Barth’s exegesis in Christ and Adam.

I have mentioned in a previous footnote how we might understand Barth’s use of the idea of ‘Church’ to interpret Paul’s references to Israel in Romans 9-11.⁴³ Although this is formally incorrect, one can say with reasonable confidence that the words ‘Church’ and ‘Israel’ would have had very different overtones to Paul to what they have for us today; in our day ‘Church’ means the religious establishment, and to read ‘Church’ as Paul uses it in the formally correct sense might lead to a reinforcement of the religious establishment, which would run contrary to the character of what Paul was saying.

In the same way, when statements about man or humanity appear in the Bible, and we read them against the background of Cartesian thought, they might mean something very different to us to what they meant to Paul; they might have very different implications. They might come across very differently in an age when it is assumed that what is accepted and understood by humanity in general should be the criterion of all truth. They might well receive a priority of place in our thinking and in the development of our theology which Paul never intended them to have. Paul’s thought may well have been moving in a very different direction.

As a general point, I think it can be fairly proposed that Paul would have attributed to the state of being in Christ, or having faith in Christ, that clarity and certainty of knowledge which our contemporary thought would attribute to humanity in general, to humanity considered apart from specific religious or cultural traditions. The modern, post-Enlightenment world assumes that certainty is only available through a detachment from external authority, including detachment from Christian faith or faith in Christ; the man who doubts everything, reflects on everything, tests everything (especially by the measure of ‘humanity’), is the man who is truly spiritual, who ‘judges all things, and is himself judged by no-one’ (1 Cor 2:15). This is the nerve of the tension between modern

⁴³ i.e. in The Epistle to the Romans.

and Pauline thought, for where modern thought would place the ‘doubting subject’, Paul would place the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Cor 2:16).⁴⁴

Hence, I think it quite reasonable to say that in our modern reading of Paul we are all too likely to place greater emphasis on those aspects of his thought which appeal to common, universal human experience or intelligibility than Paul himself intended. We will have a tendency to give them a priority and essential function in our theological construction which would be alien to Paul’s own way of thinking. In our minds, specifically Christian statements might seem to depend for their validity and correct interpretation on these more generally intelligible statements; but in Paul’s mind the reverse would be likely to be true - the statements of a more general scope would have an implicit ‘proviso’ placed on them; they are only true to the extent that they conform to or do not limit and disturb the more specific Christian statements.⁴⁵ And the associated ‘modern’ tendency to misunderstand Paul would still occur when a formally correct explication of Paul had

⁴⁴ A.C.Thiselton rightly notes that verses such as these are fundamental in Barth’s theology and theological exegesis (*The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1980), pp 88f) - cf CD I/1 pp 12-13, which makes specific reference to 1 Cor 2:15f (see also Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, p 27). However, I would not agree with Thiselton’s general point that for Barth theological understanding (sometimes) takes place ‘independent of all ordinary processes of understanding’. cf M.Wallace, *Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology*, p 2: ‘Anthony C. Thiselton trades on the common misunderstanding of Barth as pneumatic exegete and argues that his emphasis on the Spirit in interpretation so separates human understanding from divine revelation that the task of hermeneutics is scuttled altogether.’ However I think we can see a more positive approach to Barth’s scriptural interpretation in Thiselton’s article, ‘Barr on Barth and Natural Theology: A Plea for Hermeneutics in Historical Theology’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994), pp 519-528.

⁴⁵ There is a striking example of this issue in an open debate between Harnack and Barth, over the meaning of Phil 4:8 (‘Whatever is true, whatever is honourable etc.’); Harnack evidently thinks of this exhortation as having a general validity beyond what is specifically Christian, whereas Barth seems to see a Christ-oriented precondition on the exhortation, relating it to the previous verse which reads ‘the peace of God ...keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus’. (A.Harnack, ‘Fifteen Questions to Those Among the Theologians who are Contemptuous of the Scientific Theology’ in J.M.Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 166 (165-6); K.Barth, ‘Fifteen Answers to Professor von Harnack’, in idem, p 169 (167-170)). Whether the verses are related exactly as Barth implies I am not sure, but I cannot help thinking that Barth has nevertheless grasped something of Paul’s thought and priorities which Harnack has missed.

been given; for its formal correctness would by no means guarantee that the relative importance he gave to different aspects of his thought would have been preserved.⁴⁶ If Barth's aim in the *Church Dogmatics* was 'to listen to what Scripture is saying',⁴⁷ then we must remember that careful listening necessarily goes beyond, and gets beneath, a formally correct exposition of the text.

I will now give an account of how this applies to the specific exegesis found in Christ and Adam.

Provisionally we can say this: when Barth says that the relationship between us and Adam depends for its validity on the relationship between us and Christ, he is saying that these aspects of Paul's thought are related to each other in a way that they are not in our way of thinking. As I said before, it seems to us that the one-many relationship which exists on both sides of the parallel actually has independent validity for Paul. But it may not have been so for Paul himself; he may well have seen the truth of basic importance in our saving relationship with Christ, and may have made reference to the universal condition of man as fallen because it provides an effective illustration of the way salvation operates in Christ.⁴⁸ But we, who come to the text with a different way of thinking, might place the opposite grid of interpretation on the text; we might suppose that Paul has placed Christ in the framework of universal humanity because of an interest in universal humanity as such: that Paul was a good Cartesian wishing to show the necessity of the salvation of Christ in the framework of what was universally knowable by 'humanity in general'. So although we think of the one-many relationship as having

⁴⁶ This general point was very clearly made (albeit in a different context) by John Henry Newman, in a letter of 1828, with the words: 'Necessary as it is, that we should all hold the same truths (as we wd. be saved) still each of us holds them in his own way; and differs from his nearest and most loved friends either in the relative importance he gives to them, or in the connected view he takes of them as in his perception of the particular consequences arising from them...' (cited in D. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), p 69.)

⁴⁷ I am referring to a verbal comment by Barth, cited in Robert C. Johnson, 'The Legacy of Karl Barth' in David L. Dickerman (ed.), *Karl Barth and the Future of Theology: a Memorial Colloquium Held at the Yale Divinity School January 28, 1969* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Divinity School Association, 1969), pp 3-4 (1-4).

⁴⁸ cf Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, p 61.

independent validity on both sides, we might unconsciously give an independent status to the Adam-side and a derivative status to the Christ-side; and although Paul seems to give independent validity to this relationship on both sides in the parallel, it could be that in his mind the relationship on the Christ-side was original and independent, and on the Adam-side dependent and derivative.

However, these are very general considerations, and I have to confess that Barth's exegesis still seems rather peculiar in its reasoning and rather abstract in its conclusions. And so I find I must enquire further into the dogmatic context of Barth's exegesis, specifically with regard to the place in his Dogmatics where he undertakes to explicate the theological doctrine of man.

Further issues in the dogmatic *context of Barth's thought*

In a sense, after all I have said, my problem remains where it was. I still cannot see why Barth does not simply give a more or less straight exegesis of 5:12-21; I cannot see why he does not leave well alone the relation between Adam and all men. This relation surely establishes what Barth's very theology depends on, that man is universally fallen and hence a theology based on a general anthropology would be wrongheaded. Why does he interfere with this basic textual datum, apparently toning down the significance of the relation of Adam to all men, and even giving it salvific overtones so it looks almost as if people experience salvation through their relation to Adam rather than becoming truly fallen?⁴⁹ Surely Barth is thereby undermining his own theology, and apparently taking leave of the natural sense of the text as well. So why bother?

In my search for an answer, I will turn again to Barth's specific doctrine of man, in CD III/2. The significance of this part volume is that instead of the mostly negative statements about the rôle of humanity which we find in the earlier volumes (especially in I/1), and instead of the mere hints that if Barth were to work out an anthropology it

⁴⁹ Barth's exegesis seems to undermine the very fallenness of humanity which, according to my view, grounds his theology: '[E]ven sinful man, whom alone we know, reflects back...the human nature of Christ and so has not ceased to be true man and has not ceased to show man's true nature to us.' (Christ and Adam, p 45.) I will return to the question of what Barth means by this later in the chapter.

would be based on Christology, here we find him actually going ahead and working it out in detail. And, as I argued in my second chapter, it is here where Barth gives us the primary background for his exegesis of Romans 5 in Christ and Adam, for it is here that he states that he intends to found anthropology on Christology; and it is also here that he gives his reason for seeking true human nature only in Christ, namely that as sinners our true human nature is concealed from us; hence we can only see it where it has been redeemed from sin in Christ.⁵⁰

But what I wish to draw attention to now is the first major clarification which Barth places on what he means. That is - although he talks of founding anthropology on Christology, nevertheless he states he has no intention of making a 'simple deduction of anthropology from Christology'.⁵¹ Rather, he understands that the issue is somewhat more complicated, that human nature as we know it exists in a number of contradictions which we cannot see beyond - in other words, it is dialectical. Any theory of man or anthropology consists in a forced reconciliation of these contradictions, and Barth specifically sees a process of self-deception occurring when one aspect of man is suppressed at the expense of another in this way. And Barth asserts that it is only in Christ that these contradictions are actually reconciled. He evidently does not mean that if we believe in Christ such contradictions will miraculously be reconciled within us; rather, he means that to believe in Christ as someone outside ourselves means that the contradictions will never be reconciled within ourselves; the circle of dialectic must not be closed but must be left open in hope.⁵²

If this all seems rather abstract, as it may well do, then I will give just one highly significant example: I mean, the contradiction between individual rights and the principle of solidarity. Without entering into any technical discussion, I would take it as broadly evident that there is a contradiction at the heart of the modern principle of freedom, namely that we believe that we have an individual right to live free from interference,

⁵⁰ CD III/2, pp 43-4.

⁵¹ CD III/2, p 47.

⁵² CD III/2, p 47.

and to enjoy or achieve certain things; but in order for that to be possible we have to maintain a certain level of responsibility towards each other. But either of these principles - rights and responsibilities - can only exist in tension with each other, and any modern theory or theory-praxis must search for a balance between the two; and, indeed, often one of the two (individualism or collectivism/solidarity) will win the day as the basic organising principle of the theory. This last will turn on the question of what is truly natural for humanity, what is the basic form of human nature - i.e. is it individual or collective?

The significance for Barth's exegesis of Romans 5

I have chosen this example for the simple reason that it occurs explicitly in Barth's concluding statements of Christ and Adam, which hark back to the subtitle of the book itself - Man and Humanity - that is, he seems to use 'man' to mean 'individual human' and 'humanity' to mean humanity considered as a social or collective entity. Here, in these concluding statements, Barth states that Adam is 'at once an individual and only an individual, and, at the same time, without in any way losing his individuality, he is also the responsible representative of all men'; and Barth then connects this with a summary of two conflicting ways of understanding man:

Might not humanity be a corporate personality of which individuals are only insignificant manifestations or fragmentary parts? Or might not the whole notion of humanity be a fiction, and the reality consist of only a collection of individuals each essentially unrelated to the others and each responsible only for himself? Romans 5:12-21 points in neither of these directions. If we base our thinking on this passage, we can have nothing to do with either collectivism on the one hand or individualism on the other. It understands the true man in neither of these ways.⁵³

Barth seems to assume that Paul has seen an implicit reconciliation of the conflict between individualism and collectivism, in that he assumes a unity of the human race in Adam. Barth then goes on to ask - how is Paul able to grasp this unity, when he is basing it on 'nothing better than a knowledge of the corrupt nature of humanity'? And, not surprisingly, he says it is because when Paul looks at Adam, he does not see Adam alone,

⁵³ Christ and Adam, p 44.

but also the image of another, namely Christ. Thus, according to Barth, it is in Christ that the true unity of humanity becomes visible.

Although this may seem strange, I would ask the reader to reflect on the conventional way this passage is interpreted. Conventionally, one of the main preoccupations is with the doctrine of original sin - that Adam predetermined the fate of many human beings etc. Now, setting aside the historical and scientific questions of a literal Adam, I think we can say that the normal issues which predominate in an exegesis of this passage is whether it coheres with the contemporary understanding of humanity. We know, or think we know, that the individual is responsible only for himself; hence we cannot rest easy with the doctrine of original sin - and so we are drawn to emphasise those aspects of Paul's writings which seem to allow for individual responsibility.⁵⁴ Or we may draw on contemporary understanding of the need to balance individualism with solidarity or corporate responsibility, etc.⁵⁵ Either way, we come to the text believing we have a prior grasp of the true unity of humanity which can disclose to us or illuminate the meaning of the text.

Now, I feel sure I represent Barth accurately, when I say that in his view we have no natural awareness of the true and real unity of humanity; we have no natural awareness of the right balance between the individual and the collective, which would enable us to interpret the text without some kind of sinful bias. This problem, that our supposed awareness of this unity is obscured by sin, can be seen on a superficial or obvious level: there are many obnoxious people who will loudly assert their own 'rights' as an individual, while at the same time manipulating others' sense of corporate responsibility to serve them. But more subtle is the problem of collective self-deception, where a large social group will provide what seems to them to be a fair balance between the individual

⁵⁴ As I believe is true of Bultmann ('Adam and Christ', p 154), in connection with his demythologising program; but also in A.J.M. Wedderburn ('The Theological Structure of Romans V. 12', *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972-3), pp 339-54), ironically in opposition to the theory underlying Bultmann's demythologising in this passage.

⁵⁵ e.g. C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1932), pp 79-83; see also A.C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p 1225.

and the collective, while unconsciously or in practice giving a much greater proportion of rights to some individuals or groups over others.

And so - if there is no natural awareness of the true unity of humanity which has not been perverted by sin, then in Christian terms we would say that the true unity is only seen where this sin has been dealt with, that is in Christ.

To put this another way - it may be recalled that I said that the certainty and clarity of knowledge which the modern world would attribute to the detached, thinking subject, Paul would attribute only to the person re-created in Christ. We can now complement this with the likely suggestion that Paul would have attributed to the humanity re-created in Christ the kind and degree of unity the modern world would expect to be disclosed in a kind of natural self-awareness of humanity in general - that is, in humanity's awareness of itself apart from any religious or cultural commitments.

I would judge that Barth did believe that this unity of the human race exists, that there is a natural solidarity which binds people together whilst still preserving their individuality - indeed, which guarantees and enhances their individuality. ('Paul ... is not deceiving himself when he presupposes this unity as simply given even in Adam.')

⁵⁶ But our awareness of this true unity has been overlaid and obscured by sin, so that we can no longer distinguish between where we have really encountered this unity itself and where we have encountered a deliberate or unconscious manipulation of the mere idea of this unity. If we recognise that this unity can only be seen or revealed again in Christ, then this will tell us (a) that the unity is only revealed extra nos, i.e., in Christ, and (b) that we can only reach it through repentance and redemption from the sin which conceals it from us.

It is surely all too likely that a false, deceptive idea of the real unity of humanity will be inherent in every form of modern culture, and that Christianity will seek to recommend itself by showing that it embodies or reinforces this unity in an especially pure or vigorous form - that we Christians are true democrats, true Westerners, true Americans

⁵⁶ Christ and Adam, p 45.

or true Germans etc. Thus we will eliminate before we have begun the chance of real criticism of or even effective detachment from these limited sinful ideals.

Is Barth's exegesis really eisegesis after all?

I hope this gives some clue to as to what may be behind Barth's exegesis, and I hope it gives some meaning to the conclusions he draws. I hope it explains why he will not leave well alone the concept of the relation of all men to Adam, the idea of the unity of humanity in one head as a structural-corporate entity; why he will not allow this to remain a neutral concept which we can assimilate without distortion, but rather recognises it as a concept which is vulnerable to sin in the way it is interpreted, and hence in need of the redeeming grace of Christ. But, although this may give some meaning to his exegetical conclusions, and may even engage our sympathy for them, it surely doesn't change the fact that Barth seems to attribute to Paul thoughts he never had.

Surely Paul did not ask himself 'On what grounds can I know about the unity of the human race in Adam?' and then come up with the answer, 'Given that all human concepts of this unity are vulnerable to sin and deception, I realise I can only really know about it truly by looking at the place where this sin and deception is wiped out, that is in Christ'. Surely Paul never thought anything like that?

Of course, put like that, we have to answer - no, Paul did not consciously or literally think that. Nevertheless, I think we can arrive at some understanding of why Barth might have portrayed Paul's line of thought in this way.

In his exegesis, Barth was first and foremost concerned with an overriding hermeneutical presupposition about the tension between Pauline thought and modern thought, between the way Paul understood discipleship to Christ and the way modern Christianity understands itself.⁵⁷ I have already said something about this, but here I add the crucial

⁵⁷ In the history of Barth's thought, this goes back especially to the influence of Franz Overbeck on Barth's approach to the New Testament, prior to the second edition of his Epistle to the Romans; see McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 226-235. Of particular interest is p 231, where one of Overbeck's key influences

point that in the details of his exegesis, Barth was more engaged with applying this insight than with proving it. He is telling us how we should read Paul, in the light of this presupposition; he is not trying to prove the presupposition from a careful reading of Paul.

From Barth's point of view, we cannot learn about this tension by straight, common sense exegesis, or by careful exegetical method, for that would simply cover up the tension or discrepancy. Our shared concepts, which we take for granted and which we would never think could twist or overlay the meaning of Scripture - these are precisely what conceal the difference between us and Scripture, between us and Paul.

One may well ask - what then could disprove Barth's guiding presupposition, that there is such a tension, if he is always ready to read it into Scripture, and is never willing to allow the details to contradict it? This is a very serious question, especially given the fact that the details of Barth's exegesis do seem very forced, as we have seen. In essence, I believe this is the question of Barth's relation to historical-critical interpretation of Scripture, and I will be addressing this question in some detail in my next two chapters. For the present, however, I will leave this question and instead will return to the issue which I left at the close of my last chapter, namely that of the place of sin in Barth's theology.

Interim Conclusion I: the Place of Sin in Barth's Theology

In my last chapter, I discussed this issue at some length. I noted how in contemporary readings of Barth, the place of Christ in his theology seems so central and all determinative as to relativise what is meant by sin. It often seems that, according to Barth, sin can only be understood in the light of Christ. It can hardly be denied that Barth does say this; but this must not obscure the fact that sin retains a distinctive place in his theology which itself determines the way that we are to understand Christ. Barth's

on Barth is summarised: '...[B]ecause modern Christianity seeks above all things to establish itself in the world, to make itself a force alongside and supportive of other movements in modern culture rather than fundamentally opposing those movements, it is unchristian [i.e. when measured by the New Testament].'

understanding of sin and of its operation within humanity is precisely what shapes his Christology.⁵⁸

It has probably been clear that I have made use of this presupposition in the way I have read Christ and Adam. I have placed a strong emphasis on Barth's statement to the effect that we cannot know the true 'unity of humanity' because humanity is fallen into sin - and I have cited statements from the Church Dogmatics which seem to be in line with this general principle (i.e. that human self-understanding cannot be a basis for theology because humanity is fallen). But what about Barth's closing statements in Christ and Adam, where he writes not about humanity redeemed from sin or the fall, but about a humanity which is untouched by the fall and which can be found by looking to Christ? Do not the statements at the close of Christ and Adam signify that, on the basis of Christ, we can know that humanity is not so radically fallen, and that there is a true unity of human nature which exists and persists in spite of the fall?⁵⁹ Are there not statements in the Church Dogmatics which say the same type of thing repeatedly?⁶⁰ Does this not

⁵⁸ For a definitive statement on this, see CD III/2, p 44, where Barth starts to develop the idea of founding anthropology on Christology. He comments: 'In so doing, we leave the traditional way, which was to try first to establish generally what human nature is, and on this basis to interpret the human nature of Jesus Christ in particular. Our whole approach to the relation between human sin and human nature has led us irresistibly in the opposite direction. Human sin excludes us from understanding human nature except by a new disclosure through the perception of divine grace addressed to man and revealing and affirming true humanity in the midst of human sin.' (Emphasis mine.)

⁵⁹ '...[I]f Adam is subordinate to Christ, then Adam represents true and genuine human nature in so far as he shows us the man in humanity and humanity in the man. Whatever else in his representation of human nature may have to be accounted for by its later corruption and ruin, this ordering principle at least belongs to its condition and character as created and untouched by sin.' (pp 44-5.) '[T]his unity, as such, belongs not to the perversion of [Adam's] nature but to its original constitution. And so Paul makes no arbitrary assertion, and he is not deceiving himself when he presupposes this unity as simply given in Adam. He does so because he has found it given first and primarily in Christ.' (p 45.)

⁶⁰ e.g. 'What is the creaturely nature of man, to the extent that, looking to the revealed grace of God and concretely to the man Jesus, we can see in it a continuum unbroken by sin, an essence which even sin does not and cannot change?' (CD III/2, p 43); 'The fact that natural humanity as God created it was subsequently concealed by our sinful corruption is a lesser mystery than the fact that humanity is originally hidden in Jesus, so that primarily it is His and not ours.' (CD III/2, p 50.) 'If there is a basic form of humanity in which it corresponds and is similar to the divine determination of man, in this

mean that sin is relative to Christ and subordinate to Christ in Barth's theology? Here I am returning to the question I raised at the close of my last chapter, as to what method (if any) I am using to make sure I do justice to the different kinds of statements which appear in Barth's writings.

On the one hand Barth seems to say that the problem of sin is so radical that it makes any direct relationship between God and humanity impossible, and this seems to be the ground of his theological 'dialectic'. But at other times he seems to write as if the problem of sin is not so radical, because God sustains humanity from falling completely away from him; further, he emphasises that this fact can only be known through Christ. The last point causes difficulties for my thesis that it is Barth's view of the problem of sin which fundamentally shapes his Christology - for his focus on Christ seems to cover not only the question of redemption from sin, but also the question of the original goodness of humanity from creation - where there would appear to be no need for redemption. This would seem to mean that Barth's christocentrism transcends the sphere of sin and its redemption.

Provisionally I could say that it is precisely because human nature is so completely fallen that we can only see the original unfallen nature by looking to Christ, where it is redeemed and restored. Initially this would seem to reconcile the two types of statement quite satisfactorily. But this does not explain the statements where Barth seems to say that humanity is not completely fallen and that vital characteristics persist in spite of the fall.

I believe that the most crucial thing to grasp here is the hermeneutical character of Barth's statements. He is protesting against the illusion of an innocent self-awareness in humanity. Humanity's immediate self-understanding is the understanding of fallen man, and therefore is entangled in self-deception; humanity's mediate self-understanding through Christ is humanity's genuine understanding of itself; through Christ humanity

correspondence and similarity we have something constant and persistent, an inviolable particularity of his creaturely form which cannot be effaced or lost or changed or made unrecognisable even in sinful man. And the task of theological anthropology is rightly to point to this inviolable and constant factor, so that it is seen as such.' (CD III/2, p 206.)

can become aware of its real needs and even of its innate goodness. Now, this is in line with what I have said so far about how the subject (=human self-understanding) must understand its own nature on the basis of the object (=Christ). But here I add the crucial fact that in Barth's understanding humanity can become aware of its innate goodness as created by God, when its self-awareness is mediated through Christ.⁶¹

I think that Barth did take the view that man's fall into sin was more profound than has been recognised in previous theology (whether orthodox or modern), and I think that this was the shaping principle of Barth's theology from beginning to end. But Barth did not take the line that man is as bad as he could possibly be. Man is not completely and utterly evil; there is real goodness in humanity. But the new point is that human sin affects man even at the point of what seems to be his self-evident self-awareness. It affects him especially at this point. In and of himself man cannot be aware where the dividing line between good and evil lies. So, although man is rightly aware that there is sin in himself and others, he is mistaken and culpably mistaken in his understanding of where this sin really is; and, although he is rightly aware that there is true goodness in himself and others, he is equally mistaken in his understanding of where this goodness truly lies.

So I would still maintain that Barth's theology is based on a particularly intense awareness of the nature and depth of sin, i.e. the 'radical' nature of sin. But sin is not 'radical' in the sense that it tends to be totally and absolutely pervasive in humanity; it is radical in the sense that as well as anything else it also pervades the self-awareness of humanity. This is what I call the hermeneutical dimension of sin, in that sin afflicts the 'standpoint of the observer' with sinful self-deception. Barth certainly regarded this as the

⁶¹ It seems to me that Barth may well have objected to the expression 'innate goodness', on the grounds that we have no goodness except for that sustained by God. Yet Barth clearly believed in a goodness which was granted to us with creation and which can never be effaced by sin; on the grounds of this I think that the term 'innate goodness' is appropriate, and in practice less subject to misunderstanding than the converse statement that man has no innate goodness.

most serious aspect of sin and he regarded it as his urgent responsibility to proclaim and apply the gospel in view of this aspect of sin.⁶²

This is how I would understand the relation between the two types of statements in Barth's work (radical sin and ineffaceable goodness). The most striking thing is that these two types of statements, which seem to be inconsistent with each other, actually seem to form a continuous argument in Barth's reasoning without any evident sense of the tension between them. This is evident in the relevant parts of the Dogmatics, but for our purposes is sufficiently evident in Christ and Adam. Here, Barth writes that Paul cannot base conclusions about the nature of man on the basis of Adam alone, because that would be to base his conclusions on nothing sounder than the knowledge of corrupt and fallen man; then Barth seems to conclude from this that Paul can, by looking to Christ, see that the essentially good nature of humanity has not been erased by the fall.⁶³ It might seem that Barth has taken away with one hand what he has given with the other; or, more to the point, that he has cut the ground from under his own feet. But when we recognise that the statements about the fall apply specifically to the issue of human self-knowledge, then Barth's line of reasoning becomes quite comprehensible: yes, our innate, created goodness still exists, but our sin has covered up our knowledge of it; hence the precondition for a right understanding of our created goodness depends on being redeemed from sin. As Barth succinctly puts it: 'Even in this matter we are concealed from ourselves, and need the Word of God to know ourselves. But in this respect too, in our humanity as such, there is something in ourselves to know.'⁶⁴

I would like now to consider more of the practical and concrete issues which are at stake in what I have said so far. I have been writing about 'sin' and 'created goodness' in a

⁶² To put it another way - there have been and indeed are strands of Calvinist thought which maintain that humanity outside the church is as bad as it could possibly be; any appearance of goodness would be explained as one lust overcoming another etc. But even here the question of sin has not really been applied on the hermeneutical level - i.e. it has not been applied to the question of spontaneous human self-awareness; even in such a rigid hyper-Calvinism, a sense of what is right and wrong would still be culturally determined at the deepest level.

⁶³ Christ and Adam, pp 44-5.

⁶⁴ CD III/2, p 207 (emphasis mine).

rather abstract way; but, as I hope has been apparent, I am not emphasising the rôle of sin in Barth's theology in order to solve a theological puzzle; I am emphasising it in order to relate Barth's theology to concrete issues of history, especially to outbreaks of violence and war.

There is a striking passage in CD IV/1, pp 434ff, in which Barth states that the deepest evil in humanity is precisely where humanity claims to know the difference between good and evil for itself. This is entirely consistent with what I have said about the hermeneutical character of Barth's doctrine of sin, and how he regarded this as the most urgent problem of sin ('The armour behind which the real evil of the pride of man conceals itself is obviously thicker and more impenetrable at this point than at any other').⁶⁵ But here I would add that Barth relates this problem explicitly to the outbreak of war:

the war which is always holy and righteous and necessary, war under the sign of the promising crescent or the natural sickle or the useful hammer or the sacred cross, the war of blood or the (in God's sight probably no less infamous and terrible) cold war. When man thinks that his eyes are opened, and therefore that he knows what is good and evil, when man sets himself on the seat of judgement, or even imagines that he can do so, war cannot be prevented but comes irresistibly.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ CD IV/1, p 449; cf also CD IV/1, p 220: 'All sin has its being and origin in the fact that man wants to be his own judge.'

⁶⁶ CD IV/1, p 451 (emphasis mine). It is worth noting that Barth is reflecting here on the serpent's temptation of Genesis 3 ('You shall be as God'), and that there are striking parallels to this in Barth's early work. From 1922: 'It is our acquaintance not with savage and unmoral man so much as with moral man that makes us none too proud of his achievements. We are reminded by the third chapter of Genesis that man's ability to distinguish between good and evil and his consequent greatness and dignity may indicate his fall from God as well as his ascendancy over nature.' ('The Problem of Ethics Today', p 147.) And from 1915, we find the following: 'We arrogate to ourselves, unquestioningly, the right to take up the tumultuous question, What shall we do? [Was sollen wir tun?] as if that were in any case the first and most pressing problem. Only let us be quick to put our hand to reform, sanitation, methods, cultural and religious endeavours of all sorts! Only to do "real work"! And before we know it, the trumpet blast of conscience has lost its disturbing tone...The righteousness of God itself has slowly changed from being the surest of facts into being the highest among various high ideals, and is now at all events a very own affair...Eritis sicut Deus! You may act as if you were God, you may with ease take his righteousness under your own management. That is certainly pride.' ('The Righteousness of God', p 16.) It is also interesting that both the 1922 and the 1915 passages also contain a reflection on the ethical question formulated as

I believe this reference to war is no mere add-on to Barth's autonomous theological reflections, in which he naïvely thinks that if only everyone followed his dogmatics, everyone would be peaceful and happy; rather, there is a very natural, clear and close connection between the question of war and his distinctive theology, for his distinctive theology was born from a reaction against war (i.e. the First World War) and it never lost that connection. In the light of this, I will turn to consider the historical context of Christ and Adam, and examine the relation between Christ and Adam and the live issues of the time.

Interim Conclusion II: the historical context of Christ and Adam; *Barth's relation to Reinhold Niebuhr*

Now, of all the things which were going on in Barth's life at the time of Christ and Adam, it would seem most natural to give emphasis to the question of Barth's controversy with Bultmann.⁶⁷ This would be in line with Barth's later statements on the matter, and with the fact that Christ and Adam immediately followed his critique of Bultmann in the same series; it would also fit in with the fact that Christ and Adam was later published in the same volume as Barth's critique of Bultmann.⁶⁸ And indeed, I have taken recourse to quotations from this critique ('Bultmann - an attempt to understand him') in order to clarify a crucial aspect of Barth's hermeneutical approach. Specifically, I had in mind the point that Barth wished to allow the content of Scripture to speak against natural human understanding; he wished to question the modern assumption that man is the measure of all things. As I believe I have shown, this was the fundamental issue in Christ and Adam, and it was clearly the fundamental issue in Barth's controversy with Bultmann. For me, this is sufficient to explain why Barth published this essay when

Was sollen wir tun? (see note 35 of my second chapter). In all these reflections, Barth is opposing the view that humanity has an immediate and spontaneous knowledge of ethical truth.

⁶⁷ This appears to be the line taken by E. Busch, who places Christ and Adam in the context of Barth's debate with Bultmann, and includes his brief mention of the book under the heading of 'Demythologizing?' (Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts (London: SCM Press, 1976), p 389).

⁶⁸ See Barth's letter to Bultmann of 18th December 1959 (Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, pp 109-110), and the introduction to the 1964 edition of Rudolf Bultmann/Christus und Adam (pp 5f).

he did (i.e. in 1952), and to explain his later statements that there was a close connection between the essay and his hermeneutical controversy with Bultmann.

However, I do not believe that this is where the main emphasis should lie when we come to a more detailed analysis of Christ and Adam. As noted previously, Barth himself tells us that Christ and Adam was originally intended to form a part of the doctrine of man in Church Dogmatics; specifically, it was meant to form a part of an ultimately omitted subsection of this part of the Dogmatics, in which Barth would consider the relation between the individual and society. A close analysis of Christ and Adam has shown that it was ultimately concerned with the question of individualism and collectivism as alternative interpretations of the being of man - which, I presume, were meant to be the basic alternatives in considering how individual and society are related. Now - the question of individualism and collectivism did not, to the best of my knowledge, form a point of controversy between Barth and Bultmann. Certainly, it did not form the central nerve of their difference. That central nerve was the question of demythologising and of existentialist interpretation of the New Testament. And these matters are absent from the discussion in Christ and Adam.

Now, we can see that it was the same underlying issue which was at stake in Christ and Adam as in the controversy with Bultmann. The underlying issue was the rôle of the human subject in its relation to divine revelation. In his program of existentialist interpretation of Scripture, Bultmann was making a criterion of the modern self-understanding of humanity, or so Barth thought. Against this Barth contended that God's revelation in Christ should take precedence over human self-understanding. It is more than clear that Barth was stating the very same general principle in Christ and Adam. But the specific sphere of application is different in both cases. In Christ and Adam, the specific sphere is the self-awareness of humanity as to whether it is individual or collective in its basic structure.

If we take the question of the alternative between individualism and collectivism as the basic issue of Christ and Adam, then can we find anything in the historical context which will make this question something more than a merely theoretical reflection about the 'nature of man'? The most obvious answer, in the context of post-war Europe, would be

the issue of the spread of communism and the ‘Cold War’ - which, we have seen, Barth tells us is ‘in God’s sight probably no less infamous and terrible’ than the ‘war of blood’. I believe that the ‘Cold War’ is the most important historical factor for understanding the inner content of Christ and Adam, if not for understanding why it was published when it was. As might be expected, individualism refers especially to the politics of ‘the West’, i.e. to capitalism, and collectivism refers especially to the politics of ‘the East’, i.e. to communism. This is reflected in a certain political allusiveness in the original German of Christ and Adam,⁶⁹ and in Barth’s political writings/addresses of the time.⁷⁰

As made clear above, Barth recognised both individualism and collectivism as two alternatives in the self-interpretation of man; accordingly, he believed that as a Christian he must refuse to let either principle become a determining factor, for that would be to understand humanity on the basis of its (local) self-knowledge rather than on the basis of Christ. And since he understood these principles as broadly representing Western and Eastern politics, this meant that he could not say an absolute ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to either side. But his consequent refusal to say a clear ‘No’ to communism earned him very severe criticism. The atrocities connected with communism were sufficiently known at that time to make a total denunciation of it seem morally obligatory in the absolute sense.

⁶⁹ Smail translates: ‘If we base our thinking on this passage, we can have nothing to do with either collectivism on the one hand or individualism on the other’ (Christ and Adam, p 44); but Hunsinger gives us a more literal rendering: ‘If we base our thinking on this text, then we must depart from every collectivism on the left and every individualism on the right’ (G.Hunsinger (ed.), Karl Barth and Radical Politics, p 132). The original German is: ‘Denken wir von diesem Text her, dann werden wir jeden Kollektivismus links und jeden Individualismus rechts liegen lassen müssen.’ (Rudolf Bultmann/Christus und Adam, p 120.)

⁷⁰ ‘... [T]he Christian approach surpasses both individualism and collectivism. The Church knows and recognises the “interest” of the individual and of the “whole”, but it resists them both when they want to have the last word.’ (‘The Christian Community and the Civil Community’ in Barth, *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings, 1946-52* (London/Southampton: Camelot Press, 1954), p 37 (15-50).) This comes from an address given in 1946, and here Barth only notes this principle in criticism of Western politics; but later in 1949 he will apply it to both Western and Eastern politics: ‘[the Christian message] does not exclude individualism or collectivism...[I]t defends social freedom against the attacks of the West, and personal freedom against the attacks of the East.’ (‘The Christian Message and the New Humanism’, in *Against the Stream*, p 188 (183-191).)

In my previous chapter, I have noted how my interpretation of Barth by means of the concept of 'collective self-deception' has close affinities with the thought of Niebuhr; and yet this very fact makes my interpretation of Barth rather suspect as Niebuhr and Barth were known theological opponents. As it turns out, my conclusions about Christ and Adam are particularly relevant to this opposition between Niebuhr and Barth, for it was Barth's refusal to condemn communism outright which brought the opposition between Niebuhr and Barth to a head. It was in this context that Niebuhr's accusation of complete moral irrelevance was made against Barth.⁷¹

When we look at Barth's response to communism, I think it important to begin by noting the hermeneutical intent behind his position: 'Geographical and natural circumstances inevitably lead us to take sides with America and the Western hemisphere. And therefore we are influenced in our judgment of the issue...[I]t has pleased God to bring us into the world as men of the West. But it does not follow by any means that we should simply give way to Western prejudices and especially to the pressure of our Western environment. It follows that we must be all the more on our guard against regarding our Western judgment as the right and Christian judgment.'⁷² Thus Barth is clearly drawing attention to the hermeneutical principle that the 'human subject' is not innocent in its self-awareness. But this forces the question - surely on the issue of the known communist practice of denying basic human rights, to the point of torture and death, there can be no doubt that the West is right - at least on this issue? If our hermeneutical reflections on the radical limitations of the 'subject' lead us to the point of condoning atrocities - surely this means there is something wrong with our hermeneutical reflections?

This is, of course, precisely the type of accusation which Niebuhr brought against Barth. And here the difference between them can be stated thus: Niebuhr believed Barth's approach represented a passive withdrawal from the political question posed by the East; whereas Barth believed his own approach represented an active protest against the

⁷¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, 'Barth's East German Letter', p 168.

⁷² 'The Church between East and West', in *Against the Stream*, p 135 (127-146) (emphasis mine).

political presumption of the West. To put the question another way - did Barth represent a hermeneutic of isolation or a hermeneutic of protest?

Now, to put his position in perspective we must note that Barth could see, as much as anyone else, that there were very great historical evils associated with communism. As he wrote to Brunner, 'Anyone who would like from me a political disclaimer of its system and its methods may have it at once'.⁷³ But he believed that behind something so self-evident there lurked not merely a remnant of corporate self-deception but a powerful and dangerous element: the denunciation was an all too convenient legitimization of the politics of the West.⁷⁴ This had a tendency to make people blind to problems from the political right;⁷⁵ and also threatened a useless war on the basis of the political division of East and West.⁷⁶ This was entirely consistent with his position that human perspective is blind to its hidden evils, and also that the self-confidence of the human subject in judging good and evil leads inevitably to useless war.

Barth's main writing on this subject was provoked by Brunner's criticism. His position is set out in his reply to Brunner's open letter and in a longer piece entitled 'The Church between East and West', from which I have already quoted. Barth and Brunner's perhaps more famous debate on the issue of 'nature and grace'⁷⁷ is not mentioned in these writings, but I think there is good reason for thinking it was in the background somewhere. Brunner defined the problem of communism as the problem of the 'totalitarian State', which in his view denied those basic original human rights 'conferred on [the individual] as a creature of God'.⁷⁸ This is clearly connected with Brunner's position on nature and grace, that alongside revealed theology based on grace there is also a natural theology which is able to formulate general principles of human relations

⁷³ 'A Correspondence (Karl Barth's Reply)', in *Against the Stream*, p 116 (113-8).

⁷⁴ 'The Church between East and West', pp 134-5.

⁷⁵ 'The Church between East and West', p 138.

⁷⁶ 'The Church between East and West', p 136.

⁷⁷ *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

⁷⁸ 'A Correspondence (An Open Letter from Emil Brunner to Karl Barth)' in *Against the Stream*, p 110 (106-113).

and behaviour. Brunner's approach here is based explicitly on the idea of natural orders which were ordained by God with the creation of the world.⁷⁹

Barth himself does not bring in the question of nature and grace, or his view of the priority of grace over nature, when he replies to Brunner's open letter. What he actually says is that the Christian church is not bound to 'eternal truths' or to 'abstract principles' but 'to its living Lord'.⁸⁰ But this is clearly in line with his position that the specifically Christian - i.e. grace - should take precedence over the general principles derived from natural theology and from the corresponding doctrine of creation. But, precisely here, the hermeneutical character of Barth's theological approach becomes clear. Barth wishes to resist the formulation and application of general principles because he recognises that they can conceal self-interest, in this case the glorification of the perhaps equally questionable principles of Western politics. So he wishes to apply the specifically Christian understanding of repentance also here; the heart is desperately wicked, and even where it seems to have very obvious reason to be sure of itself, it must still be open to questioning itself.

It is very interesting to note how the themes of the priority of grace over nature and the priority of Christ over Adam each operate at an implicit level in the context of the urgent practical question of the response to communism. In each case, I think it essential to take into account the hermeneutical intent behind Barth's reversal of the traditional order: the point is not that 'Christians' have special insight over against the general mass of humanity; rather, the Christian faith has the special responsibility of convicting people of the sinful self-interest which is hidden in all seemingly self-evident principles - whether of 'general anthropology' ('Adam') or of principles supposedly universally valid from creation ('nature'). The same approach could also be applied to the question of Barth's reversal of the traditional Lutheran order of 'law and gospel', and it would be very interesting to compare and contrast Barth and Niebuhr's treatment of this traditional

⁷⁹ See Brunner, *The Divine Imperative* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947). For Barth's response to Brunner's work, see CD III/4, pp 19f, 36f.

⁸⁰ 'A Correspondence (Karl Barth's Reply)', p 114.

theological problem.⁸¹ But I will not say more about this in the present thesis, and instead will make some concluding comments about the historical context of Christ and Adam.

Now - of course, the fact that Barth's theology had practical consequences does not in itself mean that it was truly relevant. If it led him to politically intolerable positions, then this itself would demonstrate that his theology was dangerously irrelevant to political and practical issues - which is exactly the view advocated by Niebuhr. Indeed, especially with hindsight, it is impossible not to be troubled by Barth's refusal to condemn communism outright when we consider in particular the outworking of Stalinism. Barth wrote that 'it would be quite absurd to mention...a man of the stature of Joseph Stalin in the same breath as such charlatans as Hitler'.⁸² But in this respect history has surely justified Brunner's contrary conviction, that the main difference between Hitler and Stalin was that Stalin was ultimately far more successful in applying the principle of totalitarianism to destructive effect.⁸³ In the face of such evil, it hardly seems sufficient for Barth to

⁸¹ See CD II/2, p 511 for Barth's basic statements on the law/gospel relation, and *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, pp 192f for Niebuhr's comments on Luther's distinction between law and gospel. In one sense Niebuhr and Barth are agreed in objecting to Luther's law/gospel distinction and are agreed that gospel should also be applied in the sphere of law (contra Thiselton, *Interpreting God*, p 139, where Thiselton wrongly says that Niebuhr endorses Luther's distinction). But I would argue that Niebuhr does not really deal with the hermeneutical dimension of the problem.

⁸² 'The Church between East and West', p 139.

⁸³ 'A Correspondence (An Open Letter to Karl Barth)', p 109. cf Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (London: Pimlico, 1997), p 960: 'As a manipulator of political power, Stalin has every claim to be judged the greatest man of the twentieth century...The only person whose evil can be compared to his own was another small man with a different moustache, whom he never met, and who was not so successful.' However, it is interesting that the more recent Pimlico history, penned by Clive Ponting, suggests the contrary judgement: 'The deliberate destruction of 6 million Jews, more than half of them in specially constructed death camps which had no other purpose than mass slaughter, was an even greater crime than the Gulag slave camps of the Soviet Union.' (C.Ponting, *World History: a New Perspective* (London: Pimlico, 2001), p 776.) I would also draw attention to the more specialist studies collected and edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick (*Stalinism: New Directions* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000)). These studies collectively question the scientific and historiographical validity of the 'totalitarian' model as a means for understanding Stalinism and Nazism under a single, generalised category. Fitzpatrick (introduction, p 2) notes the huge influence of this model in the post-war West, and this gives us the historical and cultural background to Brunner's position and mode of expression.

make a restrained admission that, if asked, he would be prepared to give a 'political disclaimer of [the communist] system'.

Without wishing to say that Barth was simply correct, something must be noted on the other side, of no small significance. It seems clear that one of the worst strings of atrocities which weighs heavily on the conscience of the West, and on America in particular, is the Vietnam War. And it could be argued that the main driving force behind this was that it was 'anti-communist on principle'; it treated communism as if it were the worst threat imaginable. This anti-communist principle, when applied to the extreme and without differentiation, made the American government disastrously blind to other dangers. This in itself would seem to be a practical vindication of Barth's concerns. And I cannot help but find it highly significant that, in response to the Vietnam War and other political developments, Niebuhr himself published a retraction of his criticism of Barth, saying that he had failed to see problems which Barth had seen earlier. This was in 1969, about a year after Barth died.⁸⁴

This is not to say that Barth was unquestionably right in his judgement or handling of the question of communism. But I think it very important to reflect on practical consequences when we are assessing where the point of difference between Barth and Niebuhr really lies. Both Barth and Niebuhr were moved deeply by the problem of corporate self-deception in humanity; but Niebuhr thought that Barth and his followers were pressing this point too far - if sin has such a completely radical effect on human understanding, then this throws away what remaining chance we have of finding principles which might make at least some moral progress possible.⁸⁵ But for Barth this

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, 'Toward New Intra-Christian Endeavours', pp 1662-3; J.Bettis writes: 'It is characteristic of Niebuhr's greatness that his reversal is clear and unambiguous.' ('Political Theology and Social Ethics', p 173.) Niebuhr's actual words are as follows: 'I must now ruefully change that decade-ago opinion of mine in regard to Barth's neutralism. While I do not share his sneer at the "fleshpots of Germany and America," I must admit that our wealth makes our religious anticommunism particularly odious. Perhaps there is not so much to choose between communist and anticommunist fanaticism, particularly when the latter, combined with our wealth, has caused us to stumble into the most pointless, costly and bloody war in our history.' (pp 1662-3.)

⁸⁵ See *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p 68; cf also *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, p 39 n.1, and p 66 n.2 (in the latter Niebuhr explicitly sides with Brunner on the question of nature and grace).

approach which tries to build on the remnants of human moral capacity is not radical enough; as Christians we must always use general principles of moral capacity with a fundamental reservation and suspect that however carefully we have constructed these principles there may lurk deep structures of collective self-deception within them.⁸⁶ It is certainly true that Barth's approach may seem overly cynical and may seem to stultify what chance of moral progress we have left. Whether Barth's hermeneutical approach is a viable one in practice can only be tested by looking at specific practical issues, and my glance at the question of communism has been an attempt to make a start on doing precisely this.

For we can see how Barth's response to communism makes rather more concrete the problems and benefits of Barth's general dogmatic position. The general question stated in the last paragraph has now become the more specific, sharper question - has Barth really made an effective protest against the political presumptions of the West, or has he just thrown away the chance of building on where the West is clearly right (i.e. in the rights of the individual or 'human rights')? Related to this is Brunner's comment that there is no reason why we cannot condemn communism whilst also fighting against the injustices of Western politics, of capitalism.⁸⁷ Clearly Brunner believes that he can formulate general principles of human rights which would show up the evils of both communism and capitalism, drawing on insights of both the right and the left (rights of individual humans and social justice respectively). But Barth's refusal to condemn communism seems to mean a relaxation of what Brunner holds to be inviolable, that is the principle of human rights. And yet - something like the Vietnam conflict can show how the problem of perspective and collective self-interest affects even such inviolable

⁸⁶ I note that T.F.Torrance comments that the difference between Barth and Niebuhr's anthropology is that Barth is able to make a positive affirmation of humanity on the basis of Christ, whereas Niebuhr tends to end in critical despair ('Karl Barth: Appreciation and Tribute in Honour of his Seventieth Birthday', *Expository Times* 67 (1955-6), p 262 (261-3)). Like so many things that can be said about Barth this is not wrong but is one-sided, and I think it more pertinent to say that the difference between Barth and Niebuhr was not Barth's more positive affirmation of humanity but rather his recognition that human sin was more radical. (Torrance's comment is clearly related to the British publication of *Christ and Adam*; which was also published in honour of Barth's seventieth birthday; see Editors' Forward (one editor was T.F.Torrance) and cf Torrance, 'Karl Barth', *Expository Times* 66 (1954-5), p 209 (pp 205-9).)

⁸⁷ 'A Correspondence (An Open Letter to Karl Barth)', p 109.

principles; it could be argued that the Vietnam conflict showed how the ‘inviolable’ Western principle of human rights all too easily degenerates into a principle of the inviolable rights of Western humans. It need hardly be said that this is an urgent problem today, after the general break-up of communism.

However, whatever may be said for Barth’s insights about contemporary history, this does not absolve us from a detailed consideration of the problem of Barth’s seeming lack of insight regarding past history, specifically the history contained in or witnessed to by the biblical texts. This is, of course, the problem of Barth’s relation to historical criticism and historical understanding, and it will be the concern of my next chapter to address this issue.

Chapter Four

Barth's Exegesis in Relation to Historical Criticism

Part A: Bultmann's critique of Christ and Adam

Introduction: Barth's isolation

I have noted in previous chapters that the substance of Christ and Adam belongs originally to the part volume of Barth's Dogmatics which deals specifically with the doctrine of man. And it is striking that in the introduction to this part volume, we find that Barth makes a statement of his alienation or isolation from the contemporary world of scholarly exegesis. Barth expresses himself in terms which may recall issues alluded to in my first chapter - namely that exegetes always work with dogmatic (i.e. theological) presuppositions which they tend to keep hidden but which ought to be made explicit. But what is more noticeable is Barth's consequent statement of his own self-enforced isolation from scholarly exegesis; he states that because of this problem he must work out his own proofs from Scripture without reference to the work of standard exegesis.¹ This self-enforced isolation is reflected in the pages of Christ and Adam, which contain no explicit reference to any contemporary writer or work of any kind.

Although it may fairly be said that this explicit isolation occurs first at this point in Barth's theological writings, it cannot be denied that this tendency has its roots in his earliest output, specifically in his famous commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans. So in this chapter I will be taking a glance back at this earliest stage, with a view to examining where Barth stands in relation to what would be called more scholarly or critical exegesis.

Where does Barth stand?

The method used here for assessing where Barth stands in relation to standard exegesis will be that suggested by W.G. Jeanrond, at least in terms of the selection of primary

¹ CD III/2, p ix.

material. Jeanrond makes use of material from the first volume of the Church Dogmatics, the 'various prefaces' of the Epistle to the Romans, and the 'dialogue with his [Barth's] life-long friend Rudolf Bultmann which gave rise to many discussions of hermeneutical problems'.² There is a difference in scope between my analysis and that of Jeanrond, in that he was concerned with biblical hermeneutics, whereas I am looking more closely at Barth's relation to historical-critical exegesis; however the material selected is equally suited to the slightly different question with which I am concerned. The dialogue with Bultmann seems particularly appropriate for two reasons: first of all, because it is Bultmann rather than Barth who was accessible to even the most critical of twentieth century exegetes; accordingly the dialogue between the two seems an appropriate place to start for assessing Barth's relation to standard exegesis; secondly, Bultmann provided a particularly important critique of Christ and Adam itself, and a review of Bultmann's overall attitude to Barth will give us an opportunity to look at this critique in context.

It is clear that Bultmann, like so many others, was very much impressed with Barth's Epistle to the Romans in its second edition, and that in some part he wished to base his attempts to understand and interpret the New Testament on Barth's work. Thus there is a clear and close connection between Barth's most definitive and sustained work of scriptural interpretation and Bultmann's subsequent development. However, even at this earliest stage Bultmann had certain reservations about Barth's approach, and it is precisely these reservations which marked Bultmann off from Barth and made him accessible to even the most critical of twentieth century New Testament scholars. So it will be important that we look at what those reservations were and how Bultmann saw himself as set apart from Barth.

² W.G.Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (Basingstoke/London: Macmillan, 1991), p 128. Note: with regard to the prefaces of the Epistle to the Romans, I have mostly preferred K.Crim's translation of these prefaces (or 'forewords'), published in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, as opposed to E.Hoskyns' translations, which appear in the English edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*.

The position of Bultmann; his critique of Christ and Adam

If we look back at the earliest stage of Bultmann's development, around the time of Barth's *Romans*, we can see that one of his defining theological achievements was that he saw a specific theological significance in the discovery of the distance between the New Testament in its final form on the one hand and the historical person and teaching of Jesus on the other. A principal aspect of this was the theory that in primitive Christianity there was a development of the Hellenistic congregation separate from the Palestinian congregation, and that the Hellenistic congregation was the main presupposition of significant aspects of the New Testament - especially the writings of Paul and 'John'. However, according to Bultmann, this Hellenistic congregation (in contrast to the Palestinian congregation) had no direct, historical contact with Jesus and re-interpreted him according to the understanding of the Hellenistic (Oriental) mystery cult.³ Traditional Liberal theology could make little of the consequent alienation of much of the New Testament from the Palestinian congregation, simply because this involved a greater alienation from the historical Jesus, and it was ostensibly the historically reconstructed ethical teaching of Jesus which was the ground and source of Liberal theology. The influence of the Hellenistic mystery cult meant, by contrast, that the continual presence of the 'Christ' was determinative for the New Testament rather than the recollection of Jesus' ethical teaching. However, this did not mean that the New Testament had become simply and purely determined by these Hellenistic mystery cults; it was crucial to note that to a significant extent there remained a link with the Palestinian and hence Jewish/Jewish-Christian origins.

Here Paul especially played an important rôle; in Bultmann's reconstruction, Paul belonged to the Hellenistic community from the outset. He was a Hellenistic Jew who through his conversion 'came under the sway of the Hellenistic congregation'.⁴ However, Paul's distinctive contribution was that he provided the theological basis for a continuing relation between the Hellenistic congregations and the Palestinian congregation at

³ 'Ethical and Mystical Religion in Primitive Christianity' in J.M. Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 222-3 (221-235).

⁴ 'Ethical and Mystical Religion', pp 224-5.

Jerusalem; accordingly both Hellenistic and authentically Jewish (Palestinian) elements are visible in his presentation of the gospel.

If I understand Bultmann correctly, in his earlier writings he seemed to see a kind of creative tension between the Palestinian and Hellenistic forms of primitive Christianity, which he characterised as 'ethical' and 'mystical' respectively. (The Palestinian form was called 'ethical' because of its direct link with the ethical teaching of Jesus.) Each of these two forms in its own way brought the divine claim upon human life, but each did so in a one-sided way which resulted in the divine claim being reduced to the purely human, as a predicate of human thought or experience. Specifically, ethical religion brings the divine moral claim to human life, but this becomes merely a matter of human moral reasoning unless it is reminded by the perspective of mystical religion that God is the 'Wholly Other' of religious experience and cannot thus be reduced to immanent moral reasoning. However, in and of itself the religious experience of mystical religion cannot be distinguished from intense emotional experience, and thus in turn needs the critical corrective of ethical religion to prevent it from being dissolved in feeling.

This of course is a very simple sketch, but I think it is possible to see from this much why Bultmann took a very strong interest in Barth's Epistle to the Romans, especially in its second edition.⁵ We have already considered in some detail how Barth's theology from its earliest stage was grounded in an antithesis between what was naturally accessible in human experience and the true voice of God. According to Barth, the Word of God cannot be mediated directly either through man's natural moral sense or through his religious experience or feeling, and we can see from what has been said so far that this was especially congenial to Bultmann's reflections. However, Barth did not undertake his own reflections in connection with the problems or tensions visible within the New Testament text or within the thought of Paul himself, and this obviously caused problems for Bultmann. It was essential to Bultmann that he expound the workings of the creative

⁵ Bultmann contended that the first edition of the Epistle to the Romans constituted a repristination of the Christ myth/cult of Hellenistic Christianity, evidently because this first edition, while making nothing of the historical Jesus, seemed to assert a more or less direct presence of Christ in history through the growth of the Church ('Ethical and Mystical Religion', p 230).

tension between the different forms of primitive Christianity within the text; and this meant that there were places where the tension was not operative because one or the other form was simply present, and hence the material was not suitable for appropriation because (e.g.) Paul was merely reiterating inherited traditions. Or, more to the point, there might be discrepancies and contradictions visible within the conceptuality of the text which bear witness to the working out of this creative tension. Barth clearly had no interest in this; indeed he showed no interest in a direct conceptual analysis of the text as such, but rather relied on loose analogies between concepts in the text and the problems of the current situation, as a platform from which to expound his basic theological insight.

When we read Bultmann's critique of Barth's Christ and Adam, more than thirty years later, we can see that the basic pattern of his early ideas is still present. We can still see the idea that Jewish (=Palestinian) and Hellenistic thought appear as mutually critical correctives in Paul's presentation of the gospel. However, we would also have to take into account certain of Bultmann's later developments, especially the ideas associated with 'demythologising'. Specifically, demythologising (which Bultmann believed he could see taking place in the New Testament itself) was directed against two forms of mythical thought, one of which pertained to Jewish thought, and the other to Hellenistic thought. In Jewish thought, the relevant mythical thought form was apocalyptic; in Hellenistic thought, the relevant mythical thought form was Gnostic redemption myths.⁶ The essence of the Jewish kind of mythology was an expectation of a future intervention by God; the essence of the Hellenistic kind was an immediate determination of the present life of the believer by antecedent 'cosmic' events. Again at the risk of oversimplification, I would say that for Bultmann the problem with the Jewish myth was that it related only to the future, whereas the problem with the Hellenistic myth was that it related only to the present. What Bultmann was after was a revelation which had not lost contact with the present, but which also showed a radical tension with the present. The Jewish concept of the future intervention of God creates a tension with the present, because it does not look for God's action in the present but only in the future by hope; however, because it looks

⁶ 'New Testament and Mythology' in Bartsch (ed.), *Kerygma and Myth*, p 15 (1-44). (From an early stage, Bultmann had drawn attention to the apocalyptic or eschatological element of Jewish Christianity as well as to the ethical.)

principally to the future, it lacks the immediacy of the Gnostic myth for the present. However the two mythical thought forms together (somehow) generate the right balance of relevance to and tension with the present moment of existence.

Because of this, Bultmann finds special significance in Paul's 'paradoxical-eschatological' statements, that is, the statements of living in commitment to the present situation but with the eschatological reservation of 'as if not', as stated in texts such as 1 Corinthians 7:29-31.⁷ With this background, it comes as no surprise that when we turn to Bultmann's exposition of Romans 5, we find he sees the high point of the chapter in verses 2 following, which say that 'we boast in the hope of the glory of God - but not only that, we glory in present tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about patience etc.'⁸ Is this not the combination of radical commitment to the present moment together with radical detachment from the present moment? But Bultmann is still concerned that the mere 'hope' of Romans 5:1-11 is oriented mainly to the future, and hence is not sufficiently closely tied to the present. Hence he portrays Paul as making use of the Gnostic myth in Romans 5:12-21, which is able more vividly to portray the presence of salvation and life because it entails immediate determination of the present life of the believer by antecedent cosmic events.⁹

The 'Gnostic' myth which Bultmann attributes to Paul in Romans 5:12-21 is that of an immediate determination of human beings' present existence through their inclusion in one of two primal men (in Paul's terminology, in Adam or Christ). It is this myth which forms a critical corrective to the all-too-future orientation of 5:1-11, because, as indicated, it posits an immediate determination of the present lives of believers (by antecedent cosmic events/realities etc.). However, Bultmann's masterstroke comes when he draws attention to the apparent discrepancies between this basic Gnostic idea and the way Paul

⁷ 'New Testament and Mythology', p 20.

⁸ 'Adam and Christ', pp 145f.

⁹ 'The paradoxical eschatological character of the present for the believer is made clear in 5:1-11, and thereby the question about the presence of life has been answered for the time being. But is the presence of life not merely a relative one, i.e., only anticipated in hope? Obviously Paul felt the need to express the presence of life more clearly and he so expresses it in 5:12-21.' Bultmann, 'Adam and Christ', p 150. (cf further Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament Volume One* (London: SCM Press, 1952), pp 177-8.)

actually works it out. The point is, Paul does not seem to be happy with the thought that all men's fate is predetermined by the primal man Adam, but rather wants to relate human beings' fate to their own historical existence; specifically, in 5:12d Paul attributes the cause of death to the sins of all individuals ('because all sinned') rather than to the act of the primal man; in addition to this, Paul says that sin is only really sin when it is against a (historically) given law (5:13-14).¹⁰ Although Bultmann does not say it at this point, this critical corrective towards a more historical mode of thought relates to what he would classify as 'Jewish' based - not, to be sure, that of a future intervention of God, but more generally in terms of a historical relation to God through a focus on God's acts in history. That this last does constitute a turn to the 'Jewish' mode of thought (in Bultmann's scheme) can, I believe, be demonstrated by parallel statements in the *Theology of the New Testament*, in which it is said that the a-historical tendencies of Gnostic thought are corrected by the fact that the primitive Hellenistic church retained the Old Testament.¹¹

Thus, to summarise, Bultmann claims that Paul has countered the Jewish future orientation of Romans 5:1-11 by 'reaching for' the Gnostic myth in Romans 5:12-21 (which, supposedly, speaks more clearly of the presence of life); however, Paul needs also to correct the Gnostic idea he has adopted in order to bring it home to the historical existence of the individual believer or sinner - which, although Bultmann does not say so

¹⁰ 'Adam and Christ', p 154.

¹¹ 'Undoubtedly, the Gnostic myth and its terminology offered the possibility of elucidating the eschatological occurrence as one inaugurated by the history of Jesus Christ and now at work in the present in process of consummation... But the question now is whether this cosmic occurrence is to be understood only as a sublime process of nature which takes place by-passing, so to say, my conduct, my responsibility, my decisions... Will human history be conceived as natural process, or as genuine historical happening?' (*Theology of the New Testament* Volume One, pp 181-2 - emphasis his), and further p 117, where it is said that Gentile (Hellenistic) Christianity was in danger 'of conceiving itself simply as a "new religion" in contradistinction to the heathen and the Jews, a new religion resting upon progress in knowledge of God. This danger can be avoided by the continuing possession of the Old Testament, since it teaches an understanding of God according to which God deals with men in history and man becomes aware of God and of his own nature not by free-soaring thought but by historical encounter. For to the Old Testament God is not cosmic law, available to thought and investigation, but the God who reveals himself in the course of history'. Finally, compare the earlier essay 'Ethical and Mystical Religion', where Bultmann writes: 'For Paul, God is not the peace and quiet of the mystical God, but the Old Testament God of will who rules the history and destiny of man in the world.' (p 229.)

explicitly, shows the same pattern of allowing the Gnostic mythology to be in turn corrected by the Jewish perspective.¹² Thus, in these different ways, we can see that the fundamental thrust of Bultmann's exegesis remains an exposition of creative tensions between different traditions within the text - i.e. between Jewish thought on the one hand and Gnostic thought on the other.

Unfortunately it seems likely that the Gnostic myth of Romans 5:12-21 is more a projection from Bultmann's own schema, rather than something he actually finds in the text. Certainly, there is no critical testing at this crucial point as to whether the Gnostic myth is actually present, and more recent study of the text has shown that it is quite possible to account for the conceptual discrepancies of Romans 5:12-21 by considering its Jewish background, rather than by postulating a discrepancy between a Gnostic myth and a 'salvation-historical' perspective.¹³ More serious is the fact that it is not only here but everywhere in the New Testament that Bultmann's theory of the influence of Gnostic myth has come under suspicion; it is now more widely believed that the tensions visible within the New Testament have more to do with intra-Jewish questions, that is, between Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism; and where there is extra-Jewish influence, it is generally attributed to the Hellenistic Enlightenment (e.g. Stoicism) rather than to Hellenistic Gnostic mystery cults. We will need to bear this in mind as we turn to Bultmann's specific criticism of Barth's own exegesis of Romans 5.

¹² 'The situation is clear. Paul cannot be satisfied with having described life in 5.1-11 as already anticipated in hope, but he intends to depict it as something now already procured by Christ; it is already present with Christ in a hidden way even though for the individual it will only be actualized in the future (vss. 17 and 19). He reaches for the gnostic myth of the original man, so that he can affirm the presence of life. He corrects it (1) through the phrase "because all sinned" (vs 12), and (2) in completing the cosmological consideration with the consideration of salvation history by a reflection upon the meaning of the law in Adamic mankind.' ('Adam and Christ', p 154.)

¹³ See especially Wedderburn, 'The Theological Structure of Romans V. 12'. Bultmann believes he can see the Gnostic primal man in the Adam/Christ parallel because he thinks Paul has adopted the terminology of the Corinthian Gnostics in the parallel passage 1 Corinthians 15 (Theology of the New Testament Volume One, pp 177-8). For a critique of this, see J.Dunn, Word Biblical Commentary Volume 38A Romans 1-8 (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), pp 277-279.

Bultmann's criticism of Barth was as follows: Barth fails to notice the mythological basis of Romans 5:12-21, and, because of this, he is unable to see that Paul has critically re-interpreted the Gnostic myth; and hence Barth takes on this myth without the necessary critical amendments. This is how Bultmann accounts for Barth's notion that all men are included in Christ, which Bultmann thinks is contained in the Gnostic myth, which, as we noted, entails an inclusion of humans in (the being of) a primal man.¹⁴ What I find worth noting here is that Bultmann is repeating the type of criticisms he uttered many years before, namely that the failure to read the New Testament in its historical context leads to one aspect of the New Testament being adopted without necessary criticism: that is, he had originally criticised Liberal theology for merely adopting the perspective of the Palestinian congregation, and contemporary pietism for merely renewing the Christ-cult of Hellenistic Christianity. In the same way, he is claiming here that Barth has taken over a limited aspect of the text, pertaining to the Hellenistic congregation (i.e. the Gnostic myth), because he has failed to read the text in its historical context.¹⁵

However, whatever we may be able to say about the consistency of Bultmann's development, still his criticism of Barth in this case has been somewhat weakened by the passing of his influence on the historical reconstruction of the origin of the New Testament. Nevertheless, it still remains the case that Bultmann seems to have the edge over Barth because at least in principle he searches for ways to relate the historical study of the Bible to theological interpretation. James Smart, for example, has argued that it is particularly here, in Barth's refusal to make use of the historical study of Scripture, where he has contributed to the 'divided mind of modern theology' (i.e. the disunity in the theological scene occasioned by the division between Barth and Bultmann).¹⁶

¹⁴ 'Adam and Christ', pp 150-1; 165. Curiously, Dunn says that Bultmann is correct in saying that Barth's position is dependent on a Gnostic Christology (Romans 1-8, p 277). How can Dunn maintain this if he denies Bultmann's thesis that a Gnostic Christology is actually present? (See previous note.)

¹⁵ It is also interesting that in his criticism of Christ and Adam, Bultmann is returning to his criticism of Barth vis-à-vis the first edition of Romans (see earlier footnote).

¹⁶ J.Smart, *The Divided Mind of Modern Theology: Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann: 1908-33* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962): '...[I]n separating the historical from the theological, he [Barth] has contributed, perhaps unintentionally, to the divided mind of modern theology. The theological and the

Hence, we must take a step back from the specific historical theses of Bultmann - which Barth normally did not dispute directly in any case¹⁷ - and take a look at Barth's response to Bultmann on the general issue of the relation between historical study and theological interpretation. When we have done this, we will hopefully be able to see more clearly the significance of Barth's approach for the particular historical theses of Bultmann which I have sketched above.

Part B: Barth and the General Question of Historical Criticism

Barth on the relation between historical criticism and theological interpretation

What, then, was the general question on which Barth and Bultmann were divided in their relation to historical study of the Bible? Bultmann's main point in his criticism of The Epistle to the Romans turned on the fact that the thought and teaching of Paul must necessarily have been historically relative, and that it is therefore necessary to approach him as historically limited and hence as subject to error in order to understand him properly.¹⁸ Barth's response to this was - of course what Paul says was historically conditioned and therefore fallible; every sensible person knows that!¹⁹ And yet, if we are serious about providing a real commentary on Paul and his epistle to the Romans, then, it

historical elements are so intertwined in the text of the Scriptures that in their interpretation the historical and theological questions must be considered constantly in the closest interrelation.' (p 226.)

¹⁷ e.g. Barth agrees that there may be genuine parallels between the use of the term Kyrios for Christ and its use for Hellenistic ruler cults, although, characteristically, he immediately moves on to emphasize the intra-biblical significance of Kyrios as the Septuagint translation of Yahweh-Adonai, so that the extra-biblical parallels are granted virtually no theological significance. (CD I/1, p 400; also CD III/2, p 450) - cf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament Volume One*, p 124.

¹⁸ Bultmann, 'Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans in its Second Edition' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 120 (100-120).

¹⁹ Barth, 'Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 129 (126-130): 'I believe I have the same opinion as Bultmann and all reasonable persons concerning the relativity of all human words, even those of Paul.'

seems, we must accept the principle of unconditional loyalty to the author.²⁰ Now, the most obvious thing to ask about Barth's response is - how could it possibly be wise to give unconditional loyalty to a writer whom one acknowledges to be subject to limitations and error in some respects? In order to form an idea of what Barth was aiming at here, I will give something like a commentary on his response to Bultmann and on his other related comments. It is here that I will be making detailed use of the primary material suggested by Jeanrond which I mentioned above, i.e. the material from the prefaces to the Epistle to the Romans and the first volume of the Church Dogmatics.

I will begin with the general point: historical criticism involves identifying parallels between the biblical text and extra-biblical materials, and, by means of this, identifying historical influences on the texts and on the thought of the biblical authors themselves. Although this is always subject to the relativity of historical judgements, much success can be gained in this direction. However, whatever success there is to be gained in the historical sphere, we need to think carefully about the hermeneutical significance of such 'parallels' and of the theories of historical influences which are derived from their discovery. For when it is said that an author is subject to a historical influence, often the intended implication is that some aspect of the author's thought is without present significance and is not suitable for contemporary application; hence the question has to be raised whether a 'historical understanding' of the author of the text and of the situation of the text leads to a suppression of the text's content.²¹

²⁰ Barth, 'Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', pp 127-128. Barth's word for this loyalty is *Treueverhältnis*, which E.Hoskyns translates as 'utter loyalty' (The Epistle to the Romans, p 17) and K.Crim translates as 'relationship of faithfulness' ('Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 127). The relevant paragraph reads (in Crim's translation): 'The exegete stands before the either-or, whether or not he, knowing what is at stake, and entering into a relationship of faithfulness to the author, intends to read him with the hypothesis that the author also knew more or less clearly down to the last word...what is at stake.' (p 127.)

²¹ On this, see especially the foreword to the second edition of Romans, where Barth is discussing Wernle's criticisms: 'With a certain bitterness, Wernle writes, "There is absolutely no point in the thought of Paul that he [Barth] finds disagreeable...no remnant conditioned by the history of the times, however modest, is left over," and then he [Wernle] lists what should have been "left over" as "disagreeable points" and "remnants conditioned by the history of the times," namely: the Pauline "belittling" of the earthly lifework of Jesus, Christ as the Son of God, reconciliation through the blood of Christ, Christ and Adam, Pauline

Barth would agree that it is the biblical content as such rather than extra-biblical influences which should be normative for Christian theology; however, he believed that no clear line could be drawn between what was an extra-biblical influence and what was the 'real' subject matter of the biblical author. And because no clear line could be drawn, it became too much a matter for the judgement and perspective of the interpreter as to what should be relegated to being a mere 'historical influence' and what should be regarded as having permanent significance.²² Put simply, if an interpreter finds something illuminating, then he is likely to receive it as the veritable Word of God; if an interpreter finds something difficult, then this is attributed to the merely historical or historically

scriptural proofs, the so-called "baptism sacramentalism," double predestination, and Paul's relation to the magistrate. Let us imagine a commentary on Romans in which these eight little points remain unexplained, that is, are declared to be "disagreeable points" which are "left over" under a scrollwork of contemporary parallels! How could that be called a "commentary"?' ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Second Edition' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 95-6 (88-99).) See also Barth's criticism of Jülicher in the same foreword, where he complains that when Jülicher cannot explain Paul easily through the categories of modern Protestantism, he will 'ascribe responsibility for the meaning of the text to the "personality" of Paul, to the "Damascus experience"...to Late Judaism, to Hellenism, to the ancient world in general, and to some other demigods' (p 92); - and finally, in the foreword to the third edition, in criticism of Bultmann: 'What I cannot understand is the invitation...to think and to write with Paul, that is, first of all in the entirely foreign language of his Jewish-popular-Christian-Hellenistic thought world, and then suddenly, when this may get to be too much for me - as if something struck me as especially strange when everything is strange! - to speak "critically" about and against Paul. Does Bultmann not perceive that, even considered only from the point of view of purity of style, this will not do; that, as I see it, this would be a matter of bad taste, of falling back into the method of "temporally conditioned remnants" and "disagreeable points"?' ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 128.)

²² This is how I understand Barth's reply to Bultmann, when Bultmann claimed that there were other spirits present than the Spirit of Christ in Paul's letters; Barth replied that not only in some places, but everywhere one hears the voices of other spirits, and that one should not think of them as existing alongside of or competing with the Spirit of Christ; strikingly Barth goes on to insist on the hypothesis that the author knew his own subject matter with clarity down to the last word - 'for where should the limit be set - *surely not through the discovery of relationships of historical dependence?*' (Barth, 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 127 (emphasis mine); see Bultmann, 'Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans in its Second Edition', p 120). See also CD I/2, p 509, where Barth is clearly developing the same line of thought many years later: 'Not only part but all that they [the biblical authors] say is historically related and conditioned' (emphasis mine).

conditioned Paul.²³ But this means that the prior understanding and priorities of the interpreter become the criteria by which the present significance of the text is evaluated. However, a real understanding of the text would mean that the priorities of the author rather than those of the interpreter would need to be respected.

However, it is in practice extraordinarily difficult to do this; or, put another way, many would say that it is only possible to respect the author's own priorities when we admit that we cannot give the same relative importance to everything in the text as the author himself did. There may be aspects of his belief which seemed to him to be essential but which for us are merely transient, merely an aspect of his historical conditioning which we have transcended. Indeed, we can only really understand a biblical author and give a genuine exposition of what he says when we stop pretending we can make every judgement or aspect of his teaching our own, because it is only then that we will stop stretching the text to fit what we are able to believe or apply today.

Why is it so difficult to accept what a biblical author teaches or implies, not only in their occasional judgements but in persistent aspects of his thought and beliefs? This has been expressed, specifically by Bultmann, as a difference in world view. There is a 'modern' world view, and there is a 'biblical' world view (or rather, an ancient world view presupposed in the Bible), and on many points these world views are simply not compatible. In our modern world there have been advances in scientific method, in historical method and hermeneutical method which in various ways give rise to tensions between the content of many biblical texts and what is credible today.²⁴

²³ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', pp 127-8. Further, my previous notes should show that (in Barth's mind) there is a very thin line indeed between finding something 'disagreeable' for modern thought and attributing it to the 'historical conditioning' of Paul.

²⁴ There is a notoriously blunt statement of this in Bultmann's famous essay 'New Testament and Mythology', e.g. p 4, where Bultmann tells us that to require of ourselves the acceptance of the ancient world view (here labelled as 'mythical') 'would involve a sacrifice of the intellect which could have only one result - a curious form of schizophrenia and insincerity. It would mean accepting a view of the world in our faith and religion which we should deny in our everyday life. Modern thought as we have inherited it brings with it criticism of the New Testament view of the world' (emphasis his).

Yet I would say that the modern world view includes not only genuine advances in knowledge and real intellectual progress, but also a vast network of cultural and historically developed assumptions which are not self-evident but only seem so. In the terms I have laid down so far in my thesis, I would say that alongside genuine progress in the modern world view, there is also the subtle process of collective self-deception which makes certain things appear self-evident and progressive but which are really the collective self-assertion of the interests of our own culture and time.

I believe that Barth fully recognised that there was a tension between the contemporary world view and that of the Bible, and he believed that it was wrong to try to avoid or explain away the tensions which arise as a consequence when we attempt to interpret the biblical text.²⁵ However, there is a crucial respect in which he responds to this problem in the reverse way to that which is standard; he regards the tensions between the modern world view and that of the biblical text as the primary material for interpretation. The standard way of dealing with the problem is as follows: where there is a tension between our world view and that of the biblical texts, then it is assumed that it is the biblical world view which is at fault, which is primitive and so on, and that anything asserted under the presuppositions of the biblical world view needs re-interpretation in modern terms. I believe that Barth was trying to find a method which would give first place to the reverse procedure: where there is a tension between the modern world view and that of the text, we must assume that it is the modern world view which is at fault and needs re-interpretation. Thus, wherever possible, the modern world view and our own way of thinking should receive critical re-interpretation through the biblical perspective.²⁶ This is

²⁵ See most notably, CD I/2, p 508: 'In the biblical view of the world and man we are constantly coming up against presuppositions which are not ours, and statements and judgements which we cannot accept. Therefore at bottom we cannot avoid the tensions which arise at this point.' (cf also CD I/2, p 721, referred to in the following note.)

²⁶ This principle is enunciated at a number of points: see first of all Barth's response to Wernle: 'I could go even further and admit to Wernle that my calculation does not come out as exact in any single verse, that I...sense more or less clearly in the background a "remnant" that is not understood and not explained and which awaits working out. But it awaits working out - not being left over. The view that unexplained historical crumbs should in themselves be the seal of true scholarship is something that I...cannot get through my head...Taken exactly, all the "Biblicism" which I can be shown to have consists in my having the prejudice that the Bible is a good book, and that it is worthwhile to take its thoughts at least as seriously as one takes his own.' ('Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Second Edition', p 96, emphasis

precisely what we should expect from a theologian whose theology began with an attempt to disengage from the most fundamental and widespread assumptions of modern thought.

We can now return to the question with which I started this section - how can Barth admit the relativity of the Biblical authors, and at the same time urge as necessary the 'condition of absolute loyalty'? The answer must be that in Barth's view it is all too easy to see the 'relativity' of the Biblical text; the difficult thing is to see the relativity of one's own thought world. Because of this, methodological priority must be given to criticising the contemporary world view in the light of the text, as opposed to the more normal procedure of criticising the text in the light of the contemporary world view. Barth's procedure is not at all inconsistent with conceding the historical relativity of the biblical

mine.) See also in Barth's response to Bultmann: 'He [the responsible expositor] never lets himself be entirely bluffed by the voice of the "other spirits" who often make the dominant notes of the "Spirit of Christ" almost inaudible. He always looks first for the lack of understanding in himself and not in Paul.' ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 127, emphasis mine.) Barth goes on to admit that there might be some authors where such a procedure is impossible, where their thought can only be regarded as of past-historical interest, but even here 'there is always the question whether what is enigmatic or puzzling is to be sought more on their side, or more on the side of us who observe them' ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 128 - cf also Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp 5f). See also Barth's later response to Bultmann's claim about the 'givenness' of the 'modern world view': 'Of course, everyone approaches the New Testament with some kind of preconceptions, as he does any other document. We all have our prior notions of possibility, truth and importance...And, of course, as we seek to understand the New Testament, our first reaction is bound to be one of self-defence against its strangeness...[W]e shall always be trying to confine this strangeness within the strait jacket of our prior understandings and preconceptions. But have we any right to elevate all this into a methodological principle? To defy that strangeness with a "thus far and no further"? What business has the modern world view here, however tenaciously we cling to it and imagine we are morally obliged to uphold it?' ('Bultmann - an attempt to understand him', p 124 - see also CD III/2, p 447.) It is worth comparing the parallel passage in CD I/2 in this light (pp 508-510), and see also CD I/2, p 721: '...[I]f the Word of God has actually come into its own, and if it is to be clearly seen, the only thing which can happen to [our own] world of thought...is that it should at least give ground (for we cannot simply free ourselves from it, nor ought we to try to do so, since emancipation from it is identical with the resurrection of the flesh), that it should become fluid, losing its absoluteness, subordinating itself and following the Word...To try to hold together ...the testimony of the Bible...and the autonomy of our own world of thought is an impossible hermeneutic program.'

text, precisely because his ‘hypothesis’ of unconditional loyalty stems not from an exalted view of the biblical text (originally he claims only the ‘prejudice’ that the Bible is a ‘good book’!); rather it stems from radical suspicion towards the contemporary world view. It need hardly be said that this is directly related to his collapse of confidence in ‘modern’, ‘enlightened’ or ‘liberal’ culture following the outbreak of the First World War.²⁷

Although I have said that Barth was seeking to find a method which would allow him to give priority to the scriptural perspective over that of the modern world, we have to recognise that we will be disappointed if we expect an explicit comparison between the scriptural perspective and that of the modern world. In fact, what is characteristically missing from much of Barth’s exposition of Scripture, and certainly from Christ and Adam, is any general statement or analysis of the ‘world view’ or ‘thought world’ or ‘perspective’ of the text itself in its historical context. One may then well ask the question - how could Barth hope to give a methodological priority to the world view etc. of the text if he formed no particular idea of what it was? The answer must be the hermeneutical contention that the actual perspective of the past becomes visible only for those who are willing and able to disengage from the perspective of the present; those who attempt to provide an independent description of the past apart from this effort of disengagement will see the past through the eyes of the present - and will tend to regard it either as a ‘mere past’ beyond which we have developed, or as a part of a development which has - fortunately - led up to the present. Thus, apart from the attempt at disengagement, the past is either opaque or - a mere mirror of the present.²⁸

²⁷ cf Thurneysen’s comment in his introduction to the early Barth-Thurneysen correspondence: ‘Never has Barth denied the validity of the established results of historical-critical research. He was glad to be liberated by it from the dogma of a false “revelation-positivism.” But he did not let himself be liberated from this only to surrender at once to a new liberal dogma of the validity of the present-day world view in antithesis to biblical truth.’ (Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-1925 (London: Epworth Press, 1964), p 21.)

²⁸ There is a highly instructive passage in the Epistle to the Romans, pp 145-148, where Barth argues that the meaning of past history only becomes visible for those who experience the ‘KRISIS’ in the present. Further on this, cf Gogarten’s response to Jülicher in defence of Barth: ‘It could even be that my intention [in this reply] was to free what is “great in the past” from the humanizing and belittling that is implied by that panhistoric inclusion in general development and the pervasive dependence on development.’ (‘The

To put it another way - Barth was above all wary of the thought that encounter with the 'otherness' of the past is in and of itself an enriching exercise or that it naturally leads to self-criticism on the part of the present. In so far as the encounter with the past is not also the occasion of deliberate and explicit self-criticism, then it is not really an encounter with the past at all, but merely an unconscious domestication of the past from within the perspective of the present - however rich and diverse or inspiring and challenging the past may seem in the process. It is easy to see how this fits in with the overall pattern of Barth's anti-Cartesian thought; the past of the biblical text cannot be regarded as an object which is accessible to a detached subject or observer. It is possible to see that this was a concern in Barth's exegetical method from the very beginning of his development: in the preface to the first edition of Romans he wrote the following: 'It is certain that it was more natural for all ages which hungered and thirsted for righteousness to take a positive, active position alongside Paul instead of one of the passive detachment of an observer.'²⁹ This 'positive, active position alongside Paul' I believe does not involve a creation of meanings which we then impose on Paul, but rather means regarding our world as just as problematic as Paul regarded the world he belonged to. This is as opposed to the procedure of regarding the world we live in as fairly well established and as something Paul can be invited to support, or (to the extent that he will not support it) as a vantage point from which he may be safely dismissed by means of 'historical understanding'. To my mind, this sums up how Barth viewed the standard procedure of historical criticism and its alliance with theological interpretation.

Holy Egoism of the Christian: An Answer to Jülicher's Essay: "A Modern Interpreter of Paul" in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 85 (pp 82-87).)

²⁹ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the First Edition' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 61 (61-62). See also his response to Bultmann: 'The Spirit of Christ is not a vantage-point from which a ceaseless correction of Paul - or of anyone else - may be exercised schoolmaster-wise.' (The Epistle to the Romans, p 19.) See also CD I/2, pp 509-10: 'Again, we must be careful not to be betrayed into taking sides into playing off the one biblical man against the other, into pronouncing that this one or that one has "erred." From what standpoint can we make any such pronouncement?' In these quotations Barth is clearly not concerned with the possibility or actuality that biblical authors are in error on specific points; rather, he is concerned with the hermeneutical problem of what a pronouncement of error actually involves - namely that the 'modern world' is sufficiently secure to regard itself as a detached observer of the past.

The fundamental point is that we cannot rely on a critical, objective description of the world view of the Bible, because the perspective of our own world already intrudes on the description itself. I believe that this is what Barth means when he writes:

...[I]f we cannot decide for it [the Scripture's message]³⁰, then from the standpoint of our own unshaken intellectual world we can perceive the outlines of the apparently equally unshaken world of the Bible; and there may then arise the relative understanding which is possible between representatives of different worlds. This may lead on to the corresponding interpretation of the Bible. It cannot in this case be explained as a witness to revelation...It can be explained as a witness to revelation only to a human intellectual world the inner security of which has been shaken, and which has become yielding and responsive to the biblical world; and then it will be manifest at once that the biblical world is not an unshaken quantity, but a moving, living organ, functioning in a very definite service.³¹

This is, I believe, a very important passage, although perhaps rather obscure when taken by itself. So I would like to try to make its concerns more concrete by considering it in connection with what I believe to be the main issue in Christ and Adam. I will begin with a book entitled *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, by H.W.Robinson, which was first published in 1911 and which clearly enjoyed a significant amount of influence in how scholars understood Romans 5:12-21 in Barth's own day.³²

Robinson and the concept of 'Corporate Personality'

The first thing to notice about Robinson's book, as one looks at its earliest pages, is that it represents a very confident statement about the high development of Western thought and of how Western thought can be further enriched by the recollection of the Christian dogmas which contributed to the development of our 'highest conceptions'. One certainly gets the sense that the biblical authors are invited to give their approval to modern (i.e. modern Western) thought, and that, where they fail to do so directly, they can be corrected

³⁰ Strictly, Barth has in mind 'stooping to look into the Scriptural message' (as a literal rendering of παρακύπτειν in James 1:25) i.e. in order to look into the Scriptural message we must stoop or step down from our higher vantage-point to understand Scripture in its own terms.

³¹ CD I/2, p 719.

³² H.W.Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958 (1911)).

by means of a modern re-interpretation of those ‘primitive’ conceptions which we have transcended.³³

The ‘primitive conception’ advanced by Robinson which has a close bearing on Romans 5:12-21 is that of corporate personality. The primitive human being had, in Robinson’s view, a defective sense of his own individuality and of the individuality of others. This primitive conception was (supposedly) present in ancient Hebrew thought; accordingly it provides the background to Paul’s thought, and in turn accounts for the conceptual framework of Romans 5:12-21. Robinson writes: ‘In the foreground, we have here the other and distinct thought of Adam as the “corporate personality” of the race, over against Christ as the corporate personality of His body, the Church. God dealt with the race in Adam, because, in a real sense for ancient thought, he was the race; because of Adam’s sin, God passes sentence of death on the race.’³⁴

³³ See especially p 3: ‘[The Christian doctrine of man] has so passed into the common stock of our higher Western thought as to be the chief formative influence in our conception of personality...Men unfamiliar with the history of modern thought are often apt to despise the “dogmas” which have mediated to us some of our highest conceptions. On the other hand, in the natural eagerness of the Christian to defend those dogmas from such injustice, he must not forget that every generation has its part to play in the unceasing evolution of Christian doctrine, and that our part to-day is a somewhat stirring one. The primitive conceptions of Hebrew cosmology are replaced in the modern mind by the evolutionary view of man; the wider horizon of nature and history involves many changes in earlier conclusions...The Christian doctrine of man is not to be secluded from the thought of the age in timorous unbelief; it is to be employed amid the common wealth of the world so that it may be worthily developed by us, as it was by those who went before us.’ (Robinson comes closest to criticising this developmentalist view only in his admission that humanity does not develop as naturally and as self-evidently as a simple biological organism - pp 263-4.)

³⁴ Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p 121. In this context, it is striking that the very expression ‘corporate personality’ appears in Smail’s translation of *Christus und Adam* (Christ and Adam, p 44, quoted in my previous chapter). However we should note that the original German does not contain a direct equivalent of the expression ‘corporate personality’; instead we find the words ‘eine ideale oder auch physische Einheit des Menschengeschlechts...’ (Rudolf Bultmann/*Christus und Adam*, p 120). Although Smail’s translation is rather free there does seem to be a certain conceptual accuracy in the translation ‘corporate personality’. I think that ‘an ideal, or even physical unity of the human race’ constitutes a finely nuanced summary of Robinson’s concept.

Here I believe we have a prime example of what Barth meant by the modern intellectual world confronting the thought world of the Bible, as I will now explain. For our purposes the most important thing to note is that the picture of ancient thought emerges by a comparison with modern thought. The concept of ‘corporate personality’ is constructed by means of a critical comparison with the sense of individuality and individual responsibility which (allegedly) characterises modern thought - thus, as Barth put it, the outlines of a specific and definable (‘unshaken’) world view in the Bible emerges from the standpoint of a specific self-understanding of the modern world. Further, in Robinson’s book we can see what Barth meant by the relative understanding which can occur between two worlds of thought: firstly, there is a relative understanding between the biblical world of thought and our own because in the prophetic tradition there is a criticism of the primitive, defective concept of ‘corporate personality’;³⁵ secondly, a relative understanding can occur through a modern re-interpretation of the ancient concept of corporate personality itself - specifically as the ‘new view of social solidarity, and of individual and social heredity’.³⁶ We can surely see from this exactly what Barth means by the ‘unshaken intellectual world’ of modernity, and of how this ‘relative understanding’ between modernity and the ancient world view does not disturb the inner security of the modern world view - for nowhere is there any basic criticism or questioning of the modern world view. The only question is to what extent and in what way the ancient, biblical world view can be critically adapted to what is assuredly known in modern thought.

One of the most influential criticisms of Robinson’s basic idea of ‘corporate personality’ comes from the pen of the Old Testament scholar Rogerson, in an article published after Barth’s own time (in 1970). Rogerson argues primarily that Robinson was dependent on a concept of primitive mentality (that of Levy-Bruhl) which has now been largely

³⁵ ‘It is clear that primitive morality and religious conceptions, based on the idea of corporate personality, were seriously limited by the absence of a fuller recognition of individual rights and needs. The development of Israel’s morality and religion involved, as one of its aspects, a new emphasis on the individual person; consequently, a full account of the rise of individualism would be the history of the prophetic reformation.’ (Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p 30.)

³⁶ Robinson, *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, p 244.

superseded in anthropological theory and research.³⁷ Rogerson notes the strange situation that advocates of ‘corporate personality’ will claim that this primitive thought-form is incomprehensible to us moderns, but at the same time will illustrate it using examples from modern thinking. He then sums up:

What is the reason for these odd arguments? It is clearly lack of attention to the importance of social context in trying to establish the nature of both Hebrew and Western thought. The Hebrew thought which is allegedly so different from our own is not just based on the application to Israel of alleged mental processes of primitives; it is also an abstraction from those Israelite institutions which corporate responsibility sought to explain, formed into an entity labelled ‘Hebrew thought’ and then imposed on the rest of the Old Testament regardless of social context. At the same time, it is assumed without discussion, and again without reference to social context, that modern Western thought is individualistic.³⁸

What claims my attention in this passage is that Rogerson recognises a connection between the self-perception of modern Western thought and the portrayal of ancient thought by comparison with (and in contrast to) this self-perception. Lying behind this contrast between modern and ancient thought there is a sense of cultural and political superiority of the modern West i.e. that we represent a higher development in that we recognise the reality, significance and rights of the individual. However, when it becomes questionable that modern thought is primarily individualistic, then this casts doubt on the construct of the ‘primitive conception of corporate personality’, because the actual mix of individual and corporate elements within modern thought suggests that ‘primitive’ thought was probably rather like our own in this respect, albeit with a different spread of concrete emphases. The ‘conception of corporate personality’ is effectively a shadow cast by our own self-understanding rather than something we have actually discovered in ancient thought itself, and will only seem solid so long as our self-understanding remains solid and unquestioned: to repeat Barth’s own words, ‘from the standpoint of our own unshaken intellectual world we can perceive the outlines of the apparently equally unshaken world of the Bible’.

³⁷ J.W.Rogerson, ‘The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-examination’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 21 (1970), pp 1-16.

³⁸ Rogerson, ‘The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality’, p 13 (emphasis mine).

However, we cannot go any further without recognising a difference between Barth's concern and that of Rogerson. Rogerson is concerned to advocate a genuinely scientific approach to the question; he wants to prevent the genuine diversity of scientific data from being suppressed by being compartmentalised into prior generalisations - such as 'corporate personality' or 'Western individualism'. I believe that there is a genuine parallel between Barth and Rogerson on this point, but I think that Barth goes beyond the scientific concern to a concern with the moral dimension of generalisations:³⁹ as I have argued in my previous chapters, the most serious problem with generalisations is their strong tendency to conceal collective self-interest, and in particular in my third chapter I related this to the 'Western' principle of individual human rights. The question which faces us here, which Rogerson does not address at this point, is - how did 'Western' thought come to regard itself as individualistic if it was not so in fact? In Barth's view such a self-misunderstanding is not incidental but belongs to the moralistic rhetoric and propaganda of the Western bid for world power and domination. If this is so, it puts a far more sinister perspective on the sense of cultural superiority and self-confidence which breathed through the writings of Robinson and others.

And so, when Barth speaks of the 'human intellectual world the inner security of which has been shaken', then we are dealing not only with a recognition that modern thought is more diverse than is apparent in its general self-characterisations; rather in Barth's words here we catch the echo of a radical collapse in confidence in modern thought and its implicit claims to be 'on some peaks and heights of development'.⁴⁰ Barth came to see modern culture - indeed all human culture - as subject to sin in the way it understands its own development and achievements. Specifically, he wished to relate the innate problem of this cultural narcissism to the Biblical concept of sin.⁴¹ It is a very human tendency,

³⁹ I recognise that Barth would not use the word 'moral' (sittlich/moralisch); however, this is because he associates the word 'moral' with the 'religious-moral' deceptive self-awareness of cultured Protestantism, of which I will say much more in my subsequent chapters.

⁴⁰ Barth, 'An Answer to Professor von Harnack's Open Letter' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, p 182 (175-185).

⁴¹ On 'cultural narcissism', cf Norman Davies, *Europe: a History*: 'Unfortunately, European historians have frequently approached their subject as Narcissus approached the pool, looking only for a reflection of

which often takes subtle and unconscious forms, to regard our own culture as the framework or basic criterion for evaluating past history, including the past history enclosed and disclosed in the content of the Bible. Barth's fundamental hermeneutical decision is to relate this tendency to what the Bible means by sin; accordingly he writes: 'From the standpoint of what the biblical witness says, the fog and darkness of the human world of thought consists in the fact that, while it arises and subsists as our world, it constantly exposes our nature, the nature of sinful man, without the name of Jesus Christ, and therefore without the God who deals graciously with us. The nature of this man is a striving to justify himself from his own resources in face of a God whose image he has fashioned in his own heart...' ⁴²

It is undoubtedly here that we find the linchpin of Barth's hermeneutical concern. His general concern was with the problem that human culture is constantly building a thought-world oriented to its self-justification and self-approval. His special concern was with the way that the Bible, which supposedly brings us the gospel, which supposedly discloses the divine judgement on human attempts at self-justification - this Bible becomes incorporated (through 'exegesis' and 'interpretation') into the thought-world which is prevalent in the culture at any one time. Yet because this construction of a thought-world conceals a process of self-justification, then the incorporation of the Bible into this thought-world means that the claims of the gospel can never be brought to bear on the element of self-justification which is concealed within it. This is the real consequence of requiring that biblical study be 'scientifically' accountable and of requiring that it form an

his own beauty' (p 16); Davies then gives examples of this tendency from writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century i.e. what would have represented the attitude prevalent at the point of the emergence of Barth's distinctive theology. This becomes specifically relevant to our theme because Davies identifies belief in the high development of 'Western civilisation' as a close corollary of this 'Eurocentric' tendency, where the virtues of (e.g.) individual rights are assumed to be an inherent tendency of European civilisation. ('As for the products of European history, which the propagandists of Western civilisation are most eager to emphasize, everyone's list would vary. In the late twentieth century many would like to point to religious toleration, human rights, democratic government...and the supreme Christian virtues such as compassion, charity and respect for the individual. How far such things are truly representative of Europe's past is a matter for debate. It would not be difficult to draw up a matching list which starts with religious persecution and ends with totalitarian contempt for human life.' - p 26.)

⁴² CD I/2, 721.

integral part of the edifice of human understanding and knowledge which is generally accepted at the current stage of cultural and intellectual development.⁴³

Robinson and Bultmann: a comparison

Before developing further my analysis of Barth's interpretative approach, I think it would be helpful to pause and reflect on the similarity and differences between Robinson and Bultmann in their approach to Romans 5:12-21. As we have noted, both of them believed that there was a significant mythical element in the passage, although for Robinson it had a primitive Hebrew origin, whereas for Bultmann it had a 'Gnostic-Hellenistic' origin. Both effectively wished to develop the passage critically in the direction of individual responsibility - although Bultmann understood this in the more specific sense of existential analysis. As well as showing this greater sophistication on the anthropological side, Bultmann shows a correspondingly greater sophistication on the historical side also - in that he does not simply relate Paul directly to Old Testament thought but to the more complex sociological situation of the primitive Church as involving a mix of Jewish and Hellenistic elements. However, for our purposes, Robinson and Bultmann had this much in common: from out of the varied historical elements available to them, they constructed an essentially fictitious ancient thought form which they could then portray as having become obsolete in the modern world - and accordingly, to the extent that it appears in the text, they could claim that it requires critical re-interpretation. In both cases, the existence of the postulated ancient thought form has proved to be lacking in evidence when subjected to a more searching historical enquiry.

I think that the significance of this is that it shows how what appears to be critical honesty about the text and a willingness to distance oneself from the text, can in reality lead to a

⁴³ Although I will not go into detail on this, I believe it well worth comparing the relevant section in the Church Dogmatics, on which much of my analysis is based, with Barth's debate with Harnack, to which I believe it has a genetic relationship (the relevant section of the Church Dogmatics is entitled 'Freedom under the Word' and is found in CD I/2, pp 695-740, esp. pp 716f; the debate between Barth and Harnack is published in English translation in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 165-187 - opening with Harnack's 'Fifteen Questions to Those Among the Theologians who are Contemptuous of the Scientific Theology'.)

false systematisation of the elements of the text which do not suit modern thought, which then can be labelled a persistent characteristic of ancient thought which modern thought has a right to dispense with.

I mentioned above that I believe that a comparison between Barth and Bultmann's general approach to scriptural interpretation may enable us to show how Barth's approach was relevant to Bultmann's particular historical theses, and I hope that my present argument about Bultmann and Robinson shows that we are in part in a position to do this. For me, the fact that Bultmann and Robinson have become questionable in the manner I have sketched justifies in at least a relative way the concerns of Barth's 'hermeneutic of suspicion', i.e. that apparently neutral or general descriptions of the past can conceal within them the limitations of the perspective and self-understanding of contemporary thought. A passage like Romans 5:12-21 is bound to raise the issue of individual rights or personal responsibility, and hence its exegesis and interpretation will inevitably become incorporated into the self-justifying discourse of our contemporary culture; accordingly the exaggerations or false generalisations (exemplified by Robinson and Bultmann) are likely to appear as a symptom of this discourse.

I would like now to turn to a consideration of the most recent thorough work on the question of Barth's exegesis, namely *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis* by Richard Burnett. As will be seen, I believe that Burnett's analysis further substantiates my own view of the significance and aim of Barth's exegesis; however, it will also enable us to relate Barth's exegesis more closely to general or mainstream hermeneutics, and this last point will be developed more fully in my next chapter, which will explore possible parallels between Barth and the work of H.-G. Gadamer.

Part C: Barth and the Empathetic Tradition

Barth's relation to the empathetic tradition according to Burnett

Burnett argues that Barth's hermeneutics were a deliberate attempt to break with the empathetic tradition in hermeneutical thought which had been current especially in

German thought up to Barth's time. The 'empathetic' hermeneutical tradition, beginning with Herder and refined by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, stated that the task of historical interpretation was to enter into the mind of the author, to identify with him as closely as possible, and hence to understand him from within.⁴⁴

Now - Burnett has presented Barth's hermeneutical principles as a reaction against this empathetic tradition. But, in that case, the question arises as to how Barth can make statements suggesting an immediate identification with the author, such as the following (from the preface to the second edition of *Romans*): 'I must press forward to the point where...I can almost forget that I am not the author, where I have almost understood him so well that I let him speak in my name, and can myself speak in his name.'⁴⁵ Does not Barth here echo the empathetic tradition very closely, in that he also claims to be seeking to identify himself immediately with the author? Accordingly, given Burnett's central

⁴⁴ Burnett expounds the details of the 'empathetic tradition' from pp 142-166 and following, and I do not intend to cover the same ground here. However, it needs to be mentioned that when Burnett places Schleiermacher within the empathetic tradition, he makes himself vulnerable to the criticism of Kimmerle, namely that interpreters of Schleiermacher have overemphasised the 'psychological' pole of interpretation (entering into and grasping the inner life processes of the author) at the expense of the equally important 'grammatical' pole of interpretation (knowledge of grammatical/linguistic rules etc.). (See Kimmerle's introduction to Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1977), pp 19-40 esp. pp 27-28.) This criticism was directed particularly against Dilthey and Gadamer. Dilthey of course could not respond to this, but Gadamer comments: 'Perhaps I overemphasized Schleiermacher's tendency toward psychological (technical) interpretation. Nevertheless, that is his peculiar contribution, and so his school [e.g. Dilthey] was based on psychological interpretation.' (*Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, ²1989 (1975)), p 565.) This comment is very significant for my thesis, as I am more interested in those elements of Schleiermacher's thought which were influential around the time of Barth and Bultmann, rather than in his thought as an individual. For example, we will see later on that Bultmann took it for granted that Schleiermacher and Dilthey could be taken together as advocates of a unified empathetic tradition. It may be that Schleiermacher as an individual represents a more balanced view of the hermeneutical task than comparable figures who came before and after him; nevertheless, it is at least beyond dispute that 'empathy' or psychological interpretation played a crucial role in his thinking, and that it was the most decisive element for his influence on subsequent developments. Hence, I think Burnett is at least provisionally justified in portraying Schleiermacher as a part of the empathetic tradition, and so have developed my thesis on this basis.

⁴⁵ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to Second Edition', p 93.

argument that Barth is opposing the main lines of that tradition, he finds it necessary to give a close analysis of such statements which seem to suggest continuity with it.

As I understand it, when Barth made such statements in which he seemed to imply an identification with the author, his intention was to draw attention to the historicity of the interpreter. The present, and not only the past, must be grasped in its historicity. It will be recalled that in my analysis above, with regard to what Barth meant by ‘(unconditional) loyalty to the author’, I suggested that his intent was to deny that the present has exclusive rights to determine the meaning of the past; the present must recognise that it has no detached or a-historical vantage point from which it may do this. I believe that Barth was driving at the same point when he made statements implying identification with the author; he meant a surrender of the detached attitude towards the biblical text which is implied in the normal procedure of historical criticism.

An excerpt from Burnett’s own study will illustrate why I think he, Burnett, comes to similar conclusions to myself in this regard. At this point in his study Burnett is reflecting on one of the expressions Barth used to convey the concept of identification with the author, namely that of sharing a living context with the author:

Barth did not use the phrase “living context” in his final prefaces to [the first and second editions of Romans] but it is clear that the reason he emphasised it so strongly in his preface drafts to [the first edition]⁴⁶ was because he saw it as a necessary condition for the possibility of historical interpretation. “Without this living context of the past and the present which is given within the subject matter, the words ‘history’ and ‘understanding’ have no meaning at all.” By raising it [the issue of the ‘living context’], Barth was seeking to remind his contemporaries that historical interpretation did not take place in a vacuum, in abstracto, or from some divine vantage point. Many historians and biblical scholars he recognised operated as if the only real, relevant, or living context was their own or as if they did have their own divine vantage point. Many had wittingly or unwittingly adopted a belief in the autonomy of the present which subordinated the past to the present, as if it were primarily we in the present who confer meaning upon the past, as if we were the primary arbiters of whether something from the past is to be regarded as a “dead relic” or a “living link.” The result of this was that historians and biblical scholars tended not only to forget their own historicity, e.g., the relativity

⁴⁶ Burnett has provided the first English translation of the draft prefaces to the first edition of Romans in the appendix to *Theological Exegesis*, and the page references to these draft prefaces will refer to Burnett’s appendix.

of their own standpoints, perspectives, prejudices, values, etc., but tended also to develop a rather condescending attitude to the past which is why Barth said that today's theology "does not take the prophets and apostles in earnest, instead, while it stands smiling sympathetically beside them or above them, it takes a cool or indifferent distance from them."⁴⁷

I hope that from this excerpt it is clear that my own interpretation of Barth's attitude towards historical criticism is strikingly similar to that of Burnett.⁴⁸ However, we still need to examine why Burnett sees Barth as set apart from the empathetic tradition, for it has not yet become clear how Barth's approach differs fundamentally from it. For it is clearly not the intention of the 'empathetic' writers to 'subordinate the past to the present' (as Burnett puts it) anymore than it was Barth's intention; rather, by entering immediately into the world of the author or text, their intention was to give a high value to the past in its own terms, and precisely not to understand the past merely in terms of the present. If Burnett is right, that Barth was reacting against the empathetic tradition of interpretation, then it is hard to see how Barth could accuse this tradition of not taking the prophets and apostles in earnest and taking 'a cool or indifferent distance from them'.⁴⁹

In order to explain what I believe is at stake here, I will make use of an analogy of my own, drawn from everyday life and experience. Although the analogy is my own, I hope my point is in line with Burnett's more detailed arguments.

I have in mind the straightforward, everyday situation in which we believe that someone has done (or said/thought) something which is questionable or even entirely wrong, but we nevertheless feel able to say to them: 'I understand why you did it (or said/thought it)'. In such a situation, we have suspended the question of whether the person concerned has done, said or thought the right thing as such. Often we mean that, all things considered, they have not done the right thing, or not exactly the right thing; but that given the

⁴⁷ Theological Exegesis, p 109.

⁴⁸ This is confirmed in Burnett's later summary of Barth's attitude to historical criticism: '[H]istorical criticism as generally practiced was not critical enough of its own presuppositions. It did not recognize the relativity of its judgments or of historical understanding in general. In the name of scientific objectivity it presumed to take up a position of unprejudiced, non-participatory observation outside or above history even though its judgments were often highly prejudiced and speculative.' (Theological Exegesis, p 230.)

⁴⁹ Theological Exegesis, p 109.

‘external’ circumstances, such as the pressures of the situation or the information available - and given the ‘internal’ circumstances, such as the character or weaknesses of the person (in their peculiarities or current stage of development) - then we can understand why they did it. This is, I believe, analogous to the concept of empathy or the German *Einfühlung* from which our word empathy is derived - for in this example we would have put ourselves in the place of the other person and entered their ‘world’ in order to understand them and their situation from within.⁵⁰

If we transfer this to the field of biblical study, then we can see how it is analogous to the modern approach to the Bible. We now approach the Bible not by trying to show that it is simply correct, nor by showing that it is wrong, but by seeking to understand it in terms of the circumstances within which it was written. We cannot help but think that the biblical authors said or did things questionable or even at times entirely wrong from our point of view, but we can understand them if we suspend our point of view and empathise with them internally. Also, if we consider what I have named as the external and internal circumstances, then we find that we have equivalents in historical methodology, that is in historicism and psychologism respectively. Historicism is the principle of explaining the historical event - or text - from its historical antecedents, that is from the externally ascertainable circumstances which led up to it; psychologism means understanding the text in terms of the personal or psychological state or condition of the author which gave rise to the text - i.e. the internal circumstances.⁵¹

⁵⁰ I should say at this point that my arguments here do not depend on the German authors consistently using a single word for the concept of empathy. Dilthey uses the term *Hineinversetzen* rather than *Einfühlung* to denote what we are considering here, and Rickman translates this word as ‘empathy’. See W.Dilthey, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp 226-7; Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften VII: Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften* (Stuttgart: B.G.Teubner/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958), pp 213-5). *Hineinversetzen* signifies the activity of transposing or imagining oneself into the position of someone else, and therefore corresponds to the concept under discussion in this thesis.

⁵¹ Burnett defines historicism as ‘the claim that every event in the past can be sufficiently explained solely on the basis of its antecedents’ (*Theological Exegesis*, p 147) and also gives the (quoted) definition: ‘the belief that an adequate understanding of the nature of anything and an adequate assessment of its value are to be gained by considering it in terms of the place it occupied and the role it played within a process of development’ (p 147 n. 97). Psychologism or psychological interpretation appears most clearly in

We can see generally how this ‘empathetic’ approach with its associated methods seems to give us the best of both worlds; we do not need to give up the perspective of the present by pretending we can accept the truth of what the biblical text says, but nor do we need to leap to the other extreme by making extravagant claims about the Bible’s fundamental falsehood or deceptive character. By seeking to understand the biblical text from within - by entering into the ‘world’ of the author, and suspending our judgements about right and wrong - we are able to give an account of the biblical text which steers a path between these two extremes.⁵²

However, if we look again at my example from everyday life, then we can see that there is another side to the issue of empathetic understanding. It is quite evident that when we say ‘I can understand why you did that’, then we are assuming a fuller knowledge of the situation and its implications than the other person had at the time - perhaps more than they have now. In effect, we are assuming a superior standpoint or vantage point to them. Often we may be right to do so, and often we are giving up a ‘judgmental’ attitude towards the other person when we cease to judge them in the light of later (or superior) knowledge, and begin to judge the act etc. in the light of the special circumstances (both internal and external) of the time.

However, it is all too often the case that the person who is the object of our empathetic understanding will feel ‘patronised’ by our understanding - i.e. will feel that we have been condescending towards them. They may feel that we have closed the question of the

Burnett’s analysis of Schleiermacher, in his consideration of what Schleiermacher meant by ‘understanding the author better than he understood himself’ - ‘[I]nterpretation has to do with readers reproducing in their own minds the original experience and thought processes which gave rise to the author’s word...Understanding an author better than he understood himself, therefore, for Schleiermacher, means becoming more conscious of the various factors and circumstances of which the author was unconscious or perhaps only partially conscious in the process of production’ (Theological Exegesis, p 151).

⁵² In this respect, Burnett draws on K.Stendahl’s observation that the historical approach to the Bible at the beginning of the twentieth century had moved beyond sympathy and antipathy i.e. beyond agreement and disagreement, and had adopted an ‘empathetic’ approach. (Theological Exegesis, p 261; referring to K.Stendahl, ‘Biblical Theology, Contemporary’ in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p 418 (418-432).)

intrinsic, objective rightness of their action too soon. They don't want us to understand the action from the superior standpoint of our 'empathy', saying that their action was comprehensible in the light of the internal and external circumstances of the time; rather, they want us to understand the rightness of their action in terms of its objective rightness; they want us to question our judgement that it was wholly or partly wrong. The difficulty, from their point of view, is that we have closed or ignored the question of its objective rightness at the point when we begin to understand it empathetically i.e. when we understand it only relative to its internal and external circumstances. To them it is so frustrating that we claim to 'understand' them when really we make no attempt to question our own judgement and perspective on the issue. We need to open up afresh the question of objective rightness, even or especially at the risk of our own perspective or vantage point.

Now, I think that this provides us with an effective analogy for how Barth understood the state of historical criticism based on the general idea of empathy.⁵³ When we 'understand' the biblical text in an empathetic sense, then we mean that we are striving to understand the text relative to its internal and external circumstances (psychologically and historically); and this means, implicitly, that we are assuming a superior vantage point to the biblical writers; when we enter empathetically into the world of the author to understand him from within, we are actually making a prior assumption that we are correct in our point of view and in the perspective from which we have judged the text as being in need of an 'empathetic' approach in the first place.⁵⁴ In contrast to this, Barth

⁵³ See e.g. Preface Draft 1A: '[T]oday's theology does not stand by the prophets and the apostles, does not participate in the same subject matter with them, but rather stands with the modern reader and his prejudices; it does not take the prophets and apostles in earnest, but while it stands smiling sympathetically albeit condescendingly beside them, it conceitedly distances itself from them and outwardly examines them historically and psychologically.' ('The Preface Drafts to the First Edition of Barth's *Römerbrief*', in R. Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, p 281 (277-292).)

⁵⁴ Burnett notes that Herder, the earliest main exponent of the 'empathetic' approach, asks how the 'dead profession of faith, dead customs' may be made 'alive in men' today, and recommends the process of 'empathy' to make this possible. But Burnett objects to this, commenting: 'On what grounds may the professions of faith, customs and language of the Bible be pronounced dead? From what vantage point may we who are alive in the present pronounce them dead?' (*Theological Exegesis*, p 147.) Burnett then observes that the empathetic approach implies 'the profoundly spiritual presupposition of a free,

believed that we should strive to question our own perspective and the criteria by which we suppose we can judge the biblical text; our value judgements must come into question in the light of the text's objective claim - which is what I believe Barth meant by participation in the subject matter (*die Sache*). 'Participation' essentially means the opposite of detachment - that we strive to abandon the presumption of occupying a detached position from which we may survey the past;⁵⁵ and the emphasis on the 'subject matter' (*die Sache*) corresponds, or so it seems to me, to what I have called the question of the objective rightness of the text itself. This is analogous to the situation I outlined in which the person who feels patronised by an 'empathetic' understanding may wish the other to open up afresh the issue of the objective rightness of his act and may wish the other to learn to question their perspective in the light of this issue.

However, it is vital that we also recognise the limits of this analogy; by this I mean that Barth was not basically concerned with the question of the 'objective rightness' of the text itself, but rather with the question of its enduring significance. The main question for him was not whether the biblical text was generally or wholly right, but whether it has

autonomous, self-positioning subject, an interpreter who knows himself to be partaking of a specific historical location, that of the present instead of the dead, albeit empathetically retrievable, past'. (Theological Exegesis, p 147); Burnett is here explicitly drawing on the work of Hans Frei (see *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp 183-201).

⁵⁵ I believe that Barth understood 'participation' as the critical alternative to 'detachment'; this becomes especially plain in the draft prefaces to the first edition of Romans. Especially I have in mind the following passages. From Preface Draft II: 'To understand an author means for me mainly to stand with him, to take each of his words in earnest, so long as it is not proven that he does not deserve this trust, to participate with him in this subject matter, in order to interpret him from the inside out. But today's theology does not stand with the prophets and the apostles; it does not stand with them but rather with the modern reader and his prejudices; it does not take the prophets and apostles in earnest, instead, while it stands smiling sympathetically beside or above them, it takes up a cool and indifferent distance from them; it critically or merrily examines the historical-psychological surface and misses its meaning.' ('Preface Drafts', p 284), and from Preface Draft III: 'An author can never be interpreted through the historical-psychological surface, but only by joining with him in the subject matter, by working with him, by taking each word of his in earnest, so long as it is not proven that he does not deserve such trust. The Bible has been approached much too carelessly with the application of this emergency clause. The mistrust one has, the Unwillingness-To-Understand, the non-participatory, distancing of oneself, has simply been made into a scientific principle.' ('Preface Drafts', p 288.)

continuing significance for us, and the problem with the contemporary state of biblical exegesis was that it assumed - unintentionally, to be sure - that the biblical text no longer had continuing significance for us, that scholars viewed the biblical text as a 'dead relic' rather than a 'living link'.⁵⁶ The aim of the analogy I have been using is to demonstrate the inner connection between the empathetic principle of 'entering the world' of the text on the one hand and adopting a superior standpoint on the other. It shows why Barth could think that in spite of its claim to identify with the author, the empathetic tradition represents a prior failure to identify with the author at a deeper level. However we now have to move on from this analogy, as Barth's concern was more profound than the question of the simple correctness or otherwise of the biblical texts.

Dead Relics and Living Links

As we have noted, with reference to Burnett's presentation of Barth's position, the empathetic tradition of thought aimed to revitalise for the present the historically remote or 'dead' faith and customs of the past. But, in Barth's view, when we experience the past as 'dead', this is not an innocent experience; it is not simply a situation which we find ourselves in with regard to the past, which simply has to be reckoned with and taken into account in any historical method. Rather, it is a particular attitude towards the past by which we secure the 'autonomy of the present' over against the past. Barth wished to adopt a critical attitude towards the normal approach of assuming such a gap between the past and the present, and hence towards the normal procedure of making a distinction between what the text meant in its own time and what the text can mean for today.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ cf Preface Draft III, where Barth defends the traditional doctrine of inspiration because 'it at least contains the wise challenge of stubbornly occupying readers with a biblical text until it is brought forth to significant speech, until it stands before us not as a dead relic of Jewish or near-eastern nonsense, but as a living link in a movement which should move us as well'. ('Preface Drafts', p 288.)

⁵⁷ cf Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, p 243: '[W]hat was so disturbing to his critics was his refusal to draw a fundamental distinction between what it [the text] meant and what it means at any particular point. As Barth put it, from what standpoint could one possibly do so? Given "the living context" found within the subject matter of the Bible, there was no place he felt he could point to and say with any certainty "Here, this is a 'dead relic' whereas there is a 'living link.'" Moreover, exegesis which was truly scientific, he insisted, demanded a perpetual openness to the possibility that what was once thought a "dead relic" of the

I think that we can correctly represent Barth's view as follows: when we view the text in terms of its past-historical context, then we are viewing the past in a specific way, namely in such a way as to bracket out the relation between the past and the present. If we understand the past (for example) in terms of ancient Judaism or first century Gnosticism, then we are not viewing the past as it really was, in its naked objectivity; we are viewing it under the specific presupposition of its unrelatedness to the present; or at least its relation to the present is deliberately being bracketed out in this procedure. The fundamental difference between the past and the present is (in Barth's view) not a bare objective fact but is simply one way of looking at past history, and if we wish to make - or allow - the past to speak to the present, then we must follow the opposite procedure and bracket out the differences between the past and the present.⁵⁸ For me this goes some way towards accounting for the mixture of indifference and hostility Barth consistently showed towards understanding the biblical text in its 'original' historical context; this was because he viewed this 'historical' approach not as a necessary safeguard against misreading the text in a modern way, but rather as a particular way of looking at the past i.e. under the narrowing presupposition of its unrelatedness to the present.

However, I am convinced that when Barth prefers a hermeneutic of relatedness, when he speaks of regarding the text as a 'living link' rather than a 'dead relic', he does not have in mind a direct or natural connection between the past and the present. 'Relatedness' here does not mean 'familiarity'. On the contrary, it means a type of relevance which disturbs and unsettles the present. The biblical text is to be a 'living link' in that it is to be read in connection with fundamental questions about the self-understanding of the modern world. This leads me to the more general point: even though Barth seemed to be talking about a natural congeniality between the present and the past, I do not think this really represents

past could become at any moment a "living link." Nor was he willing to separate the question of what it means from what is meant in any safe, two-stage, bifurcated process which might hermetically seal the former off from the latter.'

⁵⁸ Preface IA: 'The art of historical description must then consist precisely in suspending from this dialogue [between past and present] unimportant differences of former and present ways of thought and sensibilities, instead of continually emphasizing them as the decisive matter.' ('Preface Drafts', p 281.)

what he meant and in some sense is the opposite of what he meant.⁵⁹ It is more true to Barth to say that we have no natural, direct relation to the past. Our grasp of the past is always and only relative; it is always related to and coloured by the concerns and interests of the present. It is the illusion of an objective, immediate and direct grasp of the past which causes exegetes to become blind to the fact that their grasp of the past is not a passive observation but is intimately related to the only too active interest of the present.

The problem of cultural self-awareness

One may well question how Barth's statements regarding his supposed identification with the biblical author and his statements regarding the unity of past and present can really be consistent with such conclusions as these. How can it be right, in view of Barth's comments on the matter, to argue that he believed that we have no direct relation to the past at all? However, I think that it is a consistent interpretation of Barth's statements to understand him in this way. His statements to the effect that we have a living or participatory relation to the past is meant to draw attention to the fact that we have the past only in the form of the active construction of our cultural and social existence. If we think that we have the past in a pure form, detached from the concerns of the present, this means that we are suppressing the fact that our reading of the past supports and endorses the culture in which we live. If, however, we make use of our reading of the past to criticise the present culture, then this liberates us from the self-imposed tyranny of unconsciously using the past merely to endorse the present. If Barth is criticised for reading his own problems into the text, and for exaggerating the anti-cultural potential of

⁵⁹ I think this is worth emphasising, because belief in a 'natural congeniality' between different historical eras is in fact a feature of the 'empathetic' tradition which, according to Burnett, Barth was meant to be opposing. The empathetic tradition presupposed a natural congeniality between the present and the past to account for the possibility of a direct empathy between the interpreter and the author (or other historical figure). In view of the intensity with which Barth claims identification with the author on the basis of some kind of common ground, Burnett considers the possibility that there may be a certain amount of continuity between Barth and the empathetic tradition (*Theological Exegesis*, pp 192-3; see also G.Eichholz, 'Der Ansatz Karl Barths in der Hermeneutik', p 67; R.Smend, 'Nachkritische Schriftauslegung', pp 223f.) However I am furthering Burnett's main line of argument, which is that any similarity between Barth and the empathetic tradition was purely formal and that he was opposed to the notion of a natural link between the present and the past.

the text, then he could reply (and, as I will show, I think he did reply) that the real danger is in thinking that one can read the text in any meaningful sense without reading in. Those who think they can read the text without being concerned with their own culture are those who uncritically endorse their own culture without knowing it. Thus Barth was concerned to combat an illusory objectivity in our attitude to the past. It is not possible to be culturally neutral in one's interpretation of the past, still less in one's interpretation of the Bible. If we do not make a reading of the text an occasion for actively criticising our culture, then we are not being neutral or passive; we have not really suspended the question of our culture to get at what the text itself is; rather, we are endorsing the standpoint and perspective of our culture uncritically - and unconsciously.

I believe that the same thing applies to Barth's apparent pretensions of direct identification with the author. It certainly appears that here we have a claim to a direct relation to the past based on the common ground between the past and the present, and of course the question must arise how this fits in with my claim that Barth's main point was to deny any such direct access to the past. Yet I would understand Barth's claim to identify with the author as a challenge to reflect on what is involved in making a distinction between what Paul meant and what we mean. I believe that Barth's objection to making such a distinction was that it involves an illusory objectivity in our understanding of Paul; the illusion would be to think that we can understand Paul while suspending questions about our own world, our own culture. To understand Paul 'in himself' apart from the practical questions of our own culture is precisely what we cannot do - and the danger is in thinking that we can do it.⁶⁰

We can put this another way. Barth knew very well that he was interpreting Paul 'for today'. He was interpreting Paul in view of the crisis of culture which he perceived to be taking place in the events of the history of his own time. Thus Barth was not giving us Paul's meaning only. He was quite self-consciously giving us an interpretation of Paul

⁶⁰ Although this is not based on specific statements in the prefaces, I believe that it stands up as a coherent interpretation of Barth's intent in the Römerbrief period. However I think the point becomes clearer in the relevant section of the Dogmatics ('Freedom under the Word'), and so it is through an analysis of this section that I will attempt to substantiate my point (see below).

that was more than Paul's own meaning.⁶¹ The real question, I believe, is why Barth refuses to give any account or justification for the specific way in which he expands on Paul's original meaning. Given that he has gone beyond Paul's meaning - as he evidently believes is necessary in any interpretation - the question is why he does not back up his own specific way of saying something different from what Paul originally intended. He does not give a critical account of how our situation differs from that of Paul, and of why we need to say something different from Paul if we are to interpret him meaningfully for our time.

I believe that Barth restrains himself from giving a systematic account of the specific issues and problems of our own time because he is sensitive to the problem of cultural self-consciousness. The problem is that we tend to assume that our own culture or time has genuine awareness of its own needs, its own problems, and so on. But this leaves out of account the persistently self-deceptive aspect which is an integral element in the formation of culture. Cultural self-awareness is far from transparent; our seeming awareness of our problems is always at least partly a suppression of an awareness of our real problems; our cultural self-awareness effectively functions to maintain an oppressive

⁶¹ In writing this I am thinking, of course, mainly of his Epistle to the Romans, although I believe that this also applies to his later exegesis. There are, I think, pivotal points in the Epistle to the Romans where Barth shows a consciousness of going beyond Paul's meaning and context: on Rom 2:25, he writes: 'The Jewish sacrament of circumcision - and this is true of every other sacrament - is no longer fellowship with God.' (Epistle to the Romans, p 74 - my emphasis); and on Rom 3:22b ('There is no distinction'): 'The reality of the righteousness of God is attested by its universality. It is not irrelevant that it is precisely Paul, who, daring, in Jesus, to put his trust boldly in grace alone, is able, in Jesus, also to perceive the divine breaking down of all human distinctions...Because he is the Apostle of the Gentiles, he is the Prophet of the Kingdom of God. Once this interdependence was obscured, there came into being what was afterwards known as "missionary work". But this is something quite different from the mission of Paul. His mission did not erect barriers; it tore them down.' (Epistle to the Romans, pp 99-100.) Especially in this last reference we have something approaching hermeneutical reflection, something very rare in Barth. My interest in these passages is that they show a conscious interest in going beyond Paul's formal meaning, at points where Barth is laying the foundation for patterns of interpretation which will dominate much of the later exposition (extending circumcision to 'every other sacrament' - including Christian sacraments - forms the basis of identifying Israel with the Church; Paul's universalistic intent is used to interpret the

social structure which has become habitual and therefore seems to be ‘natural’. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that Barth’s theology proceeds from the conviction that cultural self-awareness is principally deceptive and oppressive in its outworking; that our true awareness of our problems is weak and limited in extent, and that the ‘deceptive element’ in our apparent awareness is powerful and deep-rooted.

Thus when we attempt to provide an account of the specific problems of our own age in distinction from those of the biblical age, it is then that we fall prey to this deceptive element hidden within our cultural self-awareness. It is normally assumed that we provide a more effective and meaningful interpretation of the Bible when we adapt it to the special concerns of our age. In Barth’s view, this process of adaptation means that the real meaning of the Bible is sifted through the deceptive element hidden in our awareness of what our ‘special concerns’ are.

I believe that my point is substantiated by what I take to be the most relevant section of the Dogmatics, where Barth repeats his claim that the interpreter must aim to identify with the biblical author:

Because the Word of God meets us in the form of the scriptural word, assimilation [Aneignung] means the contemporaneity, homogeneity and indirect identification of the reader and hearer of Scripture with the witness of the revelation. Assimilation means assuming this witness into our own responsibility. How can we have heard it, and how can we be its hearers if and so long as we still distinguish our own concern from its concern? How can we have heard its Word if we do not feel compelled to speak it as our own word to ourselves and pass it on to others?⁶²

Clearly, we have here a further reflection on the necessity of identification with the author, but in a more systematic context than in the Romans prefaces, given that it appears in the Dogmatics. It is here, then, that we might expect to find Barth’s clearest explanation of what he means by identification with the author, and so I will proceed by reflecting on Barth’s line of argument in this section.

doctrine of election etc.). However, the most important point for what I am saying now is that Barth makes no attempt to justify the specific way in which he extends Paul’s meaning beyond its original context.

⁶² CD I/2, p 736.

I think the essential point in the above quoted passage is that we should not make a distinction between our concerns and the concerns of 'Scripture'. This, ultimately, is why our exposition must take the form of speaking the word of the biblical author as our own word. At this point in the Dogmatics, Barth is reflecting on the relation between the practical application of Scripture and the theoretical understanding of Scripture (the theoretical understanding being divided up into the two 'stages' of 'observation' and 'reflection'). His argument is that we should not make a real distinction between application of Scripture and a theoretical understanding of it; on the contrary, we should understand application as an integral part of the theoretical aspect. This is because if we were to grant autonomy to the 'application' stage, then we would be, as I said, relying on our self-understanding of what the special problems and needs of our own age really are:

Therefore, it is not the case that in this third and last stage of exposition, the Word is to be conveyed to man (actual, contemporary man) according to the statement of his special claims and hopes, so that applicatio means the adaptation of the Word of God to the service of this man. It is not the case that the exposition of Holy Scripture must finally issue in the answering of the so-called burning questions of the present day, that if possible it will acquire meaning and force as it is able to give an illuminating answer to the questions of the present generation...We cannot boast about a present-day point of view which it must under all circumstances take into account or to which it must correspond...If we do, it can mean only that although we may appear to be eagerly laying ourselves open to it, in fact we are shutting ourselves off from it [i.e., from Scripture]....In face of it [the freedom of the Word of God?], we cannot know beforehand what the real present is, what are its burning questions, who and what we are, "our generation," "the modern man," etc. In a very real sense this will not appear until the Bible opens up before us, to give us correct and infallible information concerning ourselves and our real questions, concerns and needs.⁶³

Here I believe we find the real meaning behind Barth's assertion that we must strive to identify ourselves (indirectly) with the biblical author. When we make the critical distinction between the biblical author and our interpretation of him, this means that we are also making a critical distinction between the concerns of the author and our own concerns, which in turn means we suppose we have a prior awareness of what our own special concerns and needs really are. The point is that our awareness of our special concerns should not remain a closed circle as we approach the Bible, but must be open to

⁶³ CD I/2, pp 738-9 (emphasis mine).

question; indeed the real task of biblical interpretation is to allow the Bible to speak a word from outside the framework of this cultural self-consciousness. The final reason why we cannot make a critical distinction and comparison between what Paul meant in his own time and what he means for today is because to do this we would need to have an awareness of the needs of our own time in order to demarcate the sphere of 'what Paul means for today' - and we have no neutral awareness of the needs of our own time which has not been compromised.

This leads me to the general point: the problem with which Barth is wrestling does not derive from an independent concern with the content of the Bible; rather, for Barth the locus of the problem is how human culture tends to assimilate anything external to itself to its own interests and prior understanding. According to my view, Barth did not start with a discovery of 'what is there' in the Bible. He did not become aware of the objective content of the Bible, and then make a critical comparison with the way people in his culture interpreted it, and then find out by means of this comparison that people were overlaying the Bible with their own distorting interpretations. His starting point was rather an awareness of the self-deceptive element within his own culture, and an awareness of how standard biblical interpretation - especially when it appears to be 'scientific' - was bound up with this deceptive element. Barth's question was - how do we allow the Bible to speak something beyond and outside this framework of cultural self-deception? This was the 'cardinal question'; this is what I believe he meant by his comment that there are texts 'e.g. those of the New Testament, which to make it speak, cost what it may, may be termed an ultimate and profound concern of culture'.⁶⁴ Barth's principal concern is with how the Bible may speak a word to us which does not simply become assimilated to the framework of our prior assumptions. But he knew only too well that this does not happen automatically or naturally; what happens automatically and naturally, under the veil of objectivity or presuppositionless reading, is that Scripture becomes assimilated to our deepest, most powerful, most hidden presuppositions.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Second Edition', p 93.

⁶⁵ cf 'What make the Word of God, in the form in which we encounter it, obscure and in need of interpretation are the ideas, thoughts and convictions which man always and everywhere brings to this Word from his own resources. When the Word of God meets us, we are laden with the images, ideas and

I believe that my general position will be further substantiated if we give a more detailed analysis of the relevant section of the Dogmatics we have been considering (i.e. the section entitled 'Freedom under the Word').

The three stages of biblical interpretation according to Barth

As indicated above in passing, Barth divides up the interpretation of Scripture into three stages, namely observation (*explicatio*), reflection (*meditatio*) and application (*applicatio*). However, I believe it is misleading to give a summary of Barth's theory of interpretation by simply listing and/or briefly summarising these three stages.⁶⁶ This is partly because it is vital to draw attention to the common thread running through Barth's treatment of these three stages, but also because it is of crucial importance to show how these three stages are fundamentally interdependent.

We will begin, then, with the common thread running through Barth's treatment of each of the three stages. This common thread is Barth's assumption that we necessarily bring to the text our prior assumptions and presuppositions, which obscure what the text needs to say to us. Because of this, there are two essential aspects to the process of interpretation: first that we recognise that we cannot escape or avoid bringing these presuppositions to the text, and second that we must not allow these presuppositions to become fixed, or think of them as in and of themselves productive for illuminating the meaning of the text, except in the most provisional way. These two aspects of Barth's attitude towards presuppositions are clearly visible in each of the three stages of biblical interpretation which Barth delineates, as I will now explain.

The first stage of biblical interpretation, observation (or '*explicatio*'), involves the apprehension of the text in its original historical context - something which is surprising in view of Barth's apparent lack of interest in historical questions. However, the most

certainties which we ourselves have formed about God, the world and ourselves.' (CD I/2, p 716; cf CD I/2, p 470.)

⁶⁶ e.g. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics*, pp 132-3; G.Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), p 43.

characteristic thing Barth has to say on the matter is that our apprehension of the historical content is only our own image or picture, and that although we may have to begin with our own images, it is essential that we allow the text to extend or even shatter our initial images and expectations of what the historical content is.⁶⁷ This general pattern appears again in Barth's consideration of the second stage, i.e. 'reflection' or meditatio; here the point is that we necessarily bring a prior scheme of thought or philosophy to the text, but we must not allow these conceptual presuppositions to become absolute and must always allow them to be open to critical modification in the course of exposition.⁶⁸ Finally, the same pattern appears in his exposition of the third stage, applicatio: here, Barth tells us that man inevitably comes to the scriptural text with his own practical expectations of what he needs from the text; and, as expected, Barth emphasises that the word of Scripture can only be heard when the reader is prepared to allow the Scripture to speak against these prior expectations.⁶⁹

In all three cases, then, we find that Barth's view is both that we do not have the text or its meaning in a pure, presuppositionless form, and that in order to 'hear' the text we have to allow it to speak against the presuppositions which we inevitably bring to it. And

⁶⁷ 'In my attempt to picture to myself the image of what is said to me, I may actually begin with what I could imagine already. But I must not refuse to widen my circle of conceptions, perhaps even to allow it to be widened in a very unexpected fashion.' (CD I/2, p 724.)

⁶⁸ 'Therefore we must not think any of our own schemes of thought is of itself fitted, or even peculiarly fitted, to apprehend and explain the word of Scripture. On the contrary, we should assume from the outset that it is not in itself fitted for this purpose, that at best it can only acquire this fitness through its encounter with and pursuit of the scriptural word.' (CD I/2, p 730.)

⁶⁹ 'It will certainly be the case that we on our side encounter the Word of God with all kinds of specific wishes and needs, hopes and fears. Not man alone in respect of his thinking, but each of us in virtue of our whole fate and character, is a specific system of presuppositions, expectations and restraints. When we assimilate something, this implies that we make it a part of this system... We utilise it in accordance with what we are and what we are not, with what we like and what we do not like. The Word of God, however, cannot be used along these lines.' (CD I/2, p 737.) 'Man is certainly right to expect something from the Word of God... But he is far from right if he stubbornly insists on trying to know for himself in what everything will consist if it is imparted to him. He is far from right if he wants to insist on the feelings and ideas with which he views it. On the contrary, he will have to be prepared for the fact that it may be

yet, illuminating as it is to highlight the common thread which runs through his exposition of the three stages, still I think that Barth's deepest insight on the matter is evident in the way he understands the interrelation between them (which I referred to above as their fundamental interdependence). Specifically, he emphasises that in the deepest sense they are not distinguishable. When Barth moves on from 'observation' to consider 'reflection', he immediately asserts that the two are not genuinely distinct, for '[e]ven in the act of observing and representing, no interpreter is merely an observer and exponent. No one is in a position, objectively and abstractly, merely to observe and present what is there. For how can he do so, without at the same time reflecting upon and interpreting what is there?'⁷⁰ Barth shows here a sensitive awareness to the fact that no observation is mere observation; observation always takes place in the context of the interpreter's prior conceptual framework:

Even in what he says as an observer and exponent, he [the interpreter] will everywhere betray the fact that, consciously or unconsciously, in cultured or primitive fashion, consistently or inconsistently, he has approached the text from the standpoint of a particular epistemology, logic or ethics...Everyone has some sort of philosophy, i.e., a personal view of the fundamental nature and relationship of things - however popular, aphoristic, irregular and eclectically vacillating. This is true even of the simplest Bible reader (and of him perhaps with particular force and tenacity). But it is definitely true of the educated Bible student...⁷¹

Thus the stage of 'reflection' is not added on to an act or process of observation which is in principle complete in itself, because the act of observation is always also reflection; it always takes place in the framework of a particular scheme of thought, and if the observer experiences himself as 'merely' observing, this only means that he is unaware of the underlying scheme of thought which is influencing and even determining his observation. I think I understand Barth aright when I add that in such a case the 'observer' is victim to his own scheme of thought, because he does not know it is there and thinks that he is observing the object as it is in itself.

imparted to him, but in a very different way, one which is perhaps quite contrary to his feelings and ideas...' (CD I/2, p 738.)

⁷⁰ CD I/2, p 727.

⁷¹ CD I/2, p 728.

The same thing applies - as we have already seen in part - to the third stage of biblical interpretation, namely application. We find that, according to Barth's analysis, this third stage must also never be understood in abstraction from the first two stages. Just as observation must always also be reflection, so observation and reflection must always also be application. Just as our act of observation is never mere observation, but always presupposes a given scheme of thought, so in turn the pre-given scheme of thought is never mere thought, but always presupposes a practical orientation or life-relation. Without appropriation on the practical level, 'observation can only be a historically aesthetic survey, and reflection only idle speculation, in spite of all the supposed openness to the object in both cases'.⁷² What Barth means here, I think, is that if we do not take into account the issue of practical application, then this falsifies or distorts the stages of observation and reflection; just as we become victim to our scheme of thought if we suppose we merely observe, so we become victim to our prior practical, life-orientation if we suppose that we merely observe and reflect. It should be emphasised that in the passage under consideration Barth was not simply making a common sense assertion that biblical study is pointless if we do not apply what we learn; rather he is expressing the hermeneutical insight that every act of interpretation or exegesis presupposes an implicit praxis - that is, a context or situation of social and cultural responsibility.

I believe that Barth's main concern in his biblical interpretation was to address the question - how can we truly hear the Word of God, given the hermeneutical complexity of hearing anything which does not correspond to what we already know? When we think that we are merely observing the Word of God, when we suppose we are being merely passive or receptive, then we are unconsciously assimilating the Word of God to a pre-given scheme of thought; when we suppose we are merely reflecting and are suspending the question of our practical life-orientation and cultural situatedness, it is then that we are unconsciously assimilating the Word of God to the prior framework of the expectations of our own culture.

This becomes significant when we consider Barth's opposition to the 'empathetic' tradition of interpretation, for one of the major characteristics of this tradition was that it

⁷² CD I/2, p 736.

recognised that all understanding of the past actually involves assimilation to the framework of our own 'inner life'. We can only understand that which we can relate to our own sense of life or interests.⁷³ This would seem to imply that we cannot really understand the past, as we can only ever see it under the limiting conditions of the presuppositions of our own lives; however, the empathetic tradition solves this problem by positing a universal, general human nature which is always and everywhere the same on a fundamental level.⁷⁴ According to this way of thinking, the fact that we always assimilate the past to our own presuppositions is not a problem, or at least not an intractable one, for our deepest presuppositions possess a natural congeniality to those of the past which we are trying to understand. I think that Barth simply did not believe in this 'general human nature', and hence the complex ways in which we unconsciously assimilate the other in the past to the presuppositions of the present is, in his view, a

⁷³ As summarised by Dilthey: '[T]he existence of other people is given us only from the outside, in sensory events, gestures, words and actions. Only through a process of reconstruction [Nachbildung] do we complete this sense perception...We are thus obliged to translate everything - the raw material, the structure, the most individual traits of such a completion - out of our own sense of life [aus der eignen Lebendigkeit].' (W.Dilthey, 'The Rise of Hermeneutics' in *New Literary History* 3 (1972), p 231 (229-244) - emphasis mine.) Also he notes: '[The degree of understanding is] determined above all by interest. If our interest is limited, so also is our understanding. How impatiently do we listen to many arguments; merely extracting the point that happens to be important to us practically, without any interest in the inner life of the speaker...' ('The Rise of Hermeneutics', p 232.)

⁷⁴ For a summary of the rôle of 'common humanity' or 'general human nature' in the empathetic tradition, see Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, pp 155, 163-4. Burnett draws attention to Schleiermacher's statement that receptivity to other individuals is made possible by the fact that every individual contains within them a minimum of every other individual (Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics*, p 150); Burnett comments: 'Here, we are obviously standing on the same ground as Herder, the ground of a common, universally intuitable core of humanity...' (*Theological Exegesis*, p 155). Burnett also shows how Dilthey draws on Schleiermacher on this very point. Dilthey writes: 'In Understanding, the individuality of the exegete and that of the author are not opposed to each other like two incomparable facts. Rather, both have been formed on the substratum of a general human nature, and it is this which makes possible the communion of people with each other in speech...Individual differences are not in the last analysis determined by qualitative differences between people, but rather through a difference in degree of development of their spiritual processes. Now, inasmuch as the exegete tentatively projects his own sense of life [seine eigne Lebendigkeit] into another historical milieu, he is able within that perspective, to strengthen and emphasize certain spiritual processes in himself and to minimize others, thus making possible within himself a re-experiencing [Nachbildung] of an alien form of life.' (W.Dilthey, 'The Rise of Hermeneutics', pp 252-3.)

problem and not a resource; however much we think we are recognising ourselves in the other, what we are really doing is shutting out the otherness of the other and assimilating it to an image of ourselves.

I think my argument in this chapter would be best summed up through a further reflection on one of Barth's famous verbally reported sayings - namely that in the Dogmatics his intention was simply to listen to what Scripture has to say and to tell people what he heard.⁷⁵ It seems very likely - as I briefly indicated in my last chapter - that what Barth said on that occasion was heavily nuanced. It was not a statement of a merely passive acquiescence in the content of Scripture - on the contrary, it is those who seem passive or who experience themselves as passive who are ignorant of the influence of active presuppositions, who are most active in assimilating Scripture to their own ends - or, rather, to the ends of the culture which they represent. Barth's statement alludes to the entire morass of hermeneutical problems which threaten to turn any true hearing of Scripture into a mixture of hearing and speaking, in which the speaking ultimately comes to dominate.⁷⁶

In the latter part of this chapter, I turned to the work of Burnett to support my own view that Barth's concern with the meaning of Scripture itself should be understood (paradoxically) as a critical concern with contemporary culture. However, drawing on Burnett has also had the considerable advantage of enabling us to relate Barth's theology and exegesis to issues of mainstream hermeneutics through our attention to the 'empathetic' tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. As well as finding in Barth an implicit critique of this empathetic tradition, Burnett also suggests in the same connection a possible parallel between Barth and the more recent philosopher H.-G. Gadamer - who also makes substantial criticisms of the empathetic tradition. If there is such a parallel, this would enable us to relate Barth positively to contemporary discussions of hermeneutics, given that Gadamer is amongst the most highly regarded scholars in the area of hermeneutics today. I will therefore devote my next chapter to following up

⁷⁵ 'If I understand what I am trying to do in the Church Dogmatics, it is to listen to what Scripture is saying and tell you what I hear.' Cited in Robert C. Johnson, 'The Legacy of Karl Barth', pp 3-4.

⁷⁶ CD I/2, p 470: 'Our supposed listening is in fact a strange mixture of hearing and our own speaking, and, in accordance with the usual rule, it is most likely that our own speaking will be the really decisive event.'

Burnett's suggestion of a comparison between Barth and Gadamer. This will also enable me to attain a clarification of the relation between Barth and Bultmann; in particular I will be following up another suggestion from Burnett, namely that on a fundamental level Bultmann represents a continuation of the empathetic tradition in hermeneutics, whereas Barth represents a fundamental criticism of this tradition.

Chapter Five

A Comparison Between Barth and Gadamer

The question of parallels between Barth and Gadamer

R. Burnett, whose work on Barth we considered in the last chapter, raised the question of a certain parallel or parallels between Gadamer, the philosopher of the human sciences and hermeneutics, and Barth. He observed that Gadamer called the first edition of Barth's *Romans* a 'hermeneutical manifesto',¹ but goes on to say that '[u]nfortunately Gadamer never elaborated on this claim nor has anyone else provided a substantive explanation of it'.² Burnett then gives his own explanation, which he goes on to elaborate throughout his study, that Barth's *Romans* 'challenged the hegemony of a reigning hermeneutical tradition, the hermeneutical tradition of Friedrich Schleiermacher'.³ We have already looked at Burnett's analysis of Barth's relation to the tradition of Schleiermacher, or rather to that hermeneutical tradition which found concretion in Schleiermacher and which Burnett refers to as the 'empathetic' tradition. In this chapter I would like to continue this line of enquiry indicated by Burnett, by examining the similarities and parallels between Gadamer and Barth.⁴

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p 509; Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, pp 3-4.

² *Theological Exegesis*, p 4.

³ *Theological Exegesis*, p 4.

⁴ Two previous writers who have made comparisons between Barth and Gadamer should be mentioned here. Firstly, M. Trowitzsch has provided a comparison between Gadamer and Barth which I think is comparable to my general position, although perhaps not so much to the more detailed analysis I will provide below. (M. Trowitzsch, "Nachkritische Schriftauslegung." *Wiederaufnahme und Fortführung einer Fragestellung* in M. Trowitzsch (ed.), *Karl Barths Schriftauslegung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), pp 73-109.) Trowitzsch compares Barth to Gadamer on the question of the subject/object relation, the crucial point being that the critical 'subject' of the Enlightenment is not neutral or free from presuppositions but is in fact implicated in the responsibility for the barbarisms of modern civilisation - especially the First World War (p 87). Trowitzsch concludes that the reason for the unnatural character (*Befremdlichkeit*) of Barth's exegesis is that he rejects contemporary critical method, believing that it legitimates the self-deception of the modern critical subject etc. (p 99). I hope it is evident how this coheres with my view of the significance of Barth's exegesis or hermeneutics; but I hope it is also evident that my analysis provides more detail regarding the relation between Barth and Gadamer in connection

In this comparison, there are two broad questions I will be concerned with. Firstly, I have presented Barth's scriptural hermeneutics as existing in a certain tension. On the one hand, it was Barth's view (as I understand it) that we do not have a direct grasp of the content of Scripture, that our grasp of this content is always and only relative. On the other hand, Barth seemed to speak in terms of a very immediate and direct grasp of the meaning of the biblical authors, to the point even of speaking of an identity between himself and the authors. I have given some explanation of this, but it is my hope that bringing out the similarities between Barth and Gadamer on this point will shed further light on the issue.

The second question I want to consider is - if there is any continuity between Barth and Gadamer, what does this mean for Barth's essential christocentrism? Is any material continuity possible between Barth and a philosopher who does not share his assumption of faith in Christ? If there are parallels between Barth and Gadamer, could this only be appropriated for Barth's theology by means of a christocentric reorganisation, by means of a transformation through what is more specifically Christian? Or might the insights of Gadamer have more fundamental implications for our understanding of Barth's theology? I would cautiously suggest the latter, and I will explain my reasons for this at the appropriate place. But first, it will be necessary for me to consider the evidence of parallels between Barth and Gadamer, before proceeding to consider their significance.

The primacy of *die Sache*

As a starting point, I will take Burnett's own primary focus in bringing out the similarity between Barth and Gadamer. Burnett focuses on a passage in the second section of Gadamer's main systematic work, *Truth and Method*.⁵ (This is the section in which

with biblical exegesis. The second author I will mention is Tiffany Conlin, who has provided a more detailed comparison between the hermeneutics of Barth and Gadamer in her PhD dissertation 'A Hermeneutical Triangle: The Positive Relationship between General and Special Hermeneutics in the Thought of Schleiermacher, Barth and Gadamer.' (King's College, London, 2000) (see pp 156-215). Conlin covers some of the same material as myself, and I will refer to her work further below.

⁵ *Theological Exegesis*, p 201.

Gadamer considers specifically the hermeneutical issues of the human sciences or Geisteswissenschaften.) In the passage to which Burnett draws attention, Gadamer makes the programmatic proposition that ‘to understand means to come to an understanding with each other (sich miteinander verstehen)’. Gadamer continues:

Understanding is, primarily, agreement (Verständnis ist zunächst Einverständnis). Thus people usually understand (verstehen) each other immediately, or they make themselves understood (verständigen sich) with a view toward reaching agreement (Einverständnis)...Understanding each other (sich verstehen) is always understanding each other with respect to something. From language we learn that the subject matter (Sache) is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding (Sichverstehen), but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself...Understanding becomes a special task only when natural life, this joint meaning of the meant [sic] where both intend a common subject matter, is disturbed. Where misunderstandings have arisen or where an expression of opinion alienates us because it is unintelligible, there natural life in the subject matter intended is impeded in such a way that the meaning is given as the opinion of another, the opinion of the Thou or of the text, or in general as a fixed datum.⁶

Gadamer presents this as the decisive insight which has become obscured through the influence of Schleiermacher, and later of Dilthey. When we consider Gadamer’s position here, we can see certain points of convergence between him and Barth: first of all, there is the concern with the subject matter or die Sache, and more specifically the continuity of life which is given in and with this subject matter. This is clearly a fundamental issue in the prefaces and draft prefaces of Romans.⁷ Secondly, there is the more general point that true understanding of what another person has to say is an understanding of the content or reference of what he/she actually says rather than an understanding of the person himself/herself. In the second part of the first volume of the Dogmatics, Barth tells us:

⁶ Truth and Method, p 180.

⁷ See especially: ‘The words “history” and “understanding” make no sense for me at all without this living context between the past and the present which cannot be achieved through some empathetic art [Einfühlungskunst], but is given in the subject matter and in which one must be.’ (‘Preface Drafts’, pp 281-2.) Barth’s explicit distancing of himself from the empathetic tradition, which Burnett emphasises, is particularly striking here.

We can speak meaningfully of hearing a human utterance only when it is clear to us in its function of indicating something that is described or intended by the word, and also when this function has become an event confronting us, when therefore by means of the human word we ourselves in some degree perceive the thing described or intended. It is only then that anyone has told me anything and I have heard it from him. We may call other things speaking and hearing, but in the strict sense they are only unsuccessful attempts at speaking and hearing.⁸

The convergence between Barth and Gadamer at this point, to which I wish to draw attention, is in the apparently conservative objectivism which is implied in these statements. Both thinkers are seeking to escape from the concept of understanding which had been taken for granted in modern hermeneutical theory, namely that the aim of understanding is to understand the speaker himself, rather than the content or reference of his utterance (i.e. the subject matter). True understanding, or at least its aim, is agreement in the subject matter; where the aim becomes an understanding of the person himself, this constitutes a failure of understanding (unsuccessful attempts at speaking and hearing).⁹ Both Barth and Gadamer would say that where the person himself has become the focus of understanding, this is at best a secondary and derivative situation, and is not the supreme achievement of understanding.

What is going on here? On the one hand, Gadamer and Barth represent an apparently common sense view: the primary task of understanding is to understand what is said, rather than to understand the speaker (or author) himself. However, common sense might also suggest that understanding what is said is only the bare minimum of what is required for understanding, adequate for the normal course of things. But when we understand not only what is said (or written) but proceed also to understand the speaker (or author) himself, then we have achieved understanding on a more profound level. If I read a past text I may understand its content and find it makes sense to me, but if I find out about the author's biography and account for what he wrote in terms of his psychological development, or in terms of the time in which he lived, then I have surely arrived at a more

⁸ CD I/2, pp 464-5.

⁹ 'The result of my inquiry in this form will be my interpretation of this human word. My exposition cannot possibly consist in an interpretation of the speaker. Did he say something to me only to display himself?' (CD I/2, p 465.)

profound understanding of the content of the text than if I simply remained with the text in isolation from these background factors.

It is this latter common sense assumption which Barth and Gadamer set out to question. In their view, the task of understanding the author himself is an ‘emergency measure’ which is undertaken when the primary task of understanding the subject matter has failed, and is only undertaken for the sake of getting back to the primary task. When interpretation regards its ultimate aim as understanding the author himself, it has gone badly wrong.¹⁰

Now - I do not think for one moment that either Barth or Gadamer thought that a broader knowledge of the context of the text such as the author’s biography or historical context would in itself distort understanding, nor that they thought we should remain with isolated texts. The question rather turns on what is the ultimate aim or focus of understanding. As is especially clear in Gadamer, the point is that specifically in the tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey the actual aim of understanding had become understanding the

¹⁰ I note that Conlin has also observed the parallel between Gadamer and Barth on the theme of ‘agreement in the subject matter’ (‘A Hermeneutical Triangle’, pp 173-5). Her analysis differs from mine on the following points: 1) She states that Gadamer and Barth have to be distinguished in that Barth states that only the subject matter of the Bible is directly comprehensible, whereas Gadamer’s argument is universal in scope (p 174). Conlin makes this type of distinction between Barth and Gadamer throughout her analysis, whereas I will argue that their concerns should not be distinguished in this way. Conlin can, of course, point to Barth’s express statements about the distinction between the Bible and other human words (CD I/2, pp 471-2), where it is stated that the special hermeneutics of scriptural exegesis should not be subordinated to the claims of general hermeneutics. However, I would argue that the background to this is Barth’s recognition of the self-deceptive or historically conditioned character of ‘generally accessible truths’; hence I would claim that here Barth is analogous to Gadamer in that, like Gadamer, his thinking has an anti-Cartesian basis (see my final chapter on the issue of anti-Cartesianism). 2) Conlin states that Barth is in agreement with W.Dilthey on the need for the interpreter to identify with the author, whereas Gadamer disagreed with Dilthey on this point (‘A Hermeneutical Triangle’, p 175). Against this, I have argued that Barth should not be understood in terms of continuity with Dilthey, and I will be arguing that Barth is comparable to Gadamer on precisely this point. Overall, my conclusion is that Barth is more closely comparable to Gadamer than is recognised by Conlin.

‘author himself’ i.e. his psychological and historical context - and this is where things had gone astray.¹¹

The problem of Romantic hermeneutics

Gadamer seeks to show that it is the intention of Romantic hermeneutics to take into account the historical being of the historian - that is, that the historian does not simply survey history as a spectator but is himself a participant in history. In Schleiermacher and Dilthey, whom Gadamer regards as principal exponents of the Romantic tradition, we see an attempt to overcome the abstraction of a detached, reflecting subject, for the latter concept does not correspond to the real conditions of historical life. However, as we shall now show, Gadamer believed that the Romantic conception of real, historical life was itself an abstraction.

In the course of his analysis, Gadamer argues that Schleiermacher is a highly significant figure in the development of hermeneutics, because he succeeds in establishing the universal scope of hermeneutics. In ‘pre-Schleiermacherian’ hermeneutics, it was assumed that understanding occurred naturally, as a matter of course, and that misunderstanding was the exception. However, Schleiermacher established the principle that misunderstanding is a universal possibility, and that understanding has to be sought and won at every point. Hence there is a great reversal; misunderstanding becomes the norm and understanding becomes, as it were, the exception. This establishes a universal need for interpretation, given that interpretation is required to avoid misunderstanding. That is, interpretation is called for when the meaning which seems obvious to the reader is the

¹¹ I should perhaps point out that I am quite deliberately following Gadamer’s understanding of Schleiermacher, and hence am not raising critical questions about whether Gadamer has overemphasised the rôle of ‘psychological’ interpretation. This is partly because it is my main intention in this chapter to compare Barth with Gadamer, and so the accuracy of Gadamer’s presentation of Schleiermacher is a secondary issue. The primary issue for my purposes would be the similarity between Gadamer and Barth’s perception of Schleiermacher. However, I also suggested in my last chapter that Gadamer was at least relatively justified in emphasising the ‘psychological’ pole in Schleiermacher’s thought, because - as Gadamer indicated - this represents Schleiermacher’s historical significance in the development of hermeneutical theory.

wrong one, and hence a direct, non-interpretative reading of the text would give rise to a misunderstanding of the text. Accordingly, if misunderstanding is a universal problem, then hermeneutics becomes universal in scope.¹²

Gadamer goes on to show how it follows from this that Schleiermacher's universal hermeneutics gives rise to his programme of giving primacy to an understanding of the author - that is, understanding the author himself as opposed to 'merely' understanding what is said. We noted above that according to common sense, understanding the content of what is said is considered sufficient in the normal course of things, but understanding the author himself constitutes a special effort of understanding which goes beyond this. But this also indicates that this special effort of understanding is required only when the 'normal course of things' has been disturbed, that is, when for some reason the content of what is said seems unintelligible or alien to us, and we have to understand the factors (i.e. biographical and/or historical) which led up to the utterance. However, because for Schleiermacher there is no 'normal course of things' in which understanding occurs naturally, then the task of understanding the author as such becomes the universal and necessary principle of true understanding rather than a technique called upon in special circumstances.¹³

The obvious question, then, arises as to how it is possible to avoid the problem of misunderstanding on the level of understanding the 'author himself'. If we assume the universal possibility of misunderstanding the content and objective claim of what is said, then surely we are just as likely to fall into error concerning the biographical or historical conditions which gave rise to the utterance? According to Gadamer, Schleiermacher deals with the problem by adhering to an 'aesthetic metaphysics of individuality'¹⁴ in which it is asserted that there is a pre-existing universal bond between all individuals, and hence 'all individuality is a manifestation of universal life'.¹⁵ This means that an understanding of

¹² Truth and Method, pp 184-5.

¹³ 'What is to be understood is now not only the exact words and their objective meaning, but also the individuality of the speaker or author. Schleiermacher holds that the author can really be understood only by going back to the origin of the thought.' (Truth and Method, p 186.)

¹⁴ Truth and Method, p 190.

¹⁵ Truth and Method, p 189.

the ‘author himself’ is possible, because the unique individuality of a past author is accessible by means of a comparison with one’s own uniquely individual self, given that to some degree the same life is manifest in both.

This is clearly the ‘empathetic’ approach to understanding past history which we have been considering, as it involves a ‘feeling-with’ the past author, and the concept of the universal bond between individuals is posited as the condition which makes possible this ‘feeling-with’ or empathy. It is clear that Gadamer’s problem with this ‘empathetic’ approach is that, in the deepest sense, it eliminates or ignores the historicity of the interpreter (and, indeed, of the past author) at a decisive point. In the final analysis it does not take into account the fact that the interpreter in the present is bounded by a limited horizon and is constituted by historical finitude. Instead, it posits a universal and timeless human nature which is present in all humans of all times, which forms a bond between interpreter and author, and hence transcends the difference between past and present. According to this scheme, humanity is not historical at its most fundamental level.

In his analysis of Dilthey, Gadamer concludes that in his philosophy based around lived experience and in his theory that the past can be understood by re-living it, he also was caught up in the problems of Romantic hermeneutics. Re-living the past in Dilthey’s sense depends on a concept of a universal life which is to some degree present in all people, and which thus makes possible re-living the past experience of another. Thus Dilthey follows the Romantic tradition of hermeneutics at this crucial point, and also falls prey to the same problem, in that his concept of ‘life’ is not essentially historical.¹⁶ In Gadamer’s view, it was only with Heidegger that there appeared a philosophy with a fundamental understanding of the historicity of human experience.¹⁷

¹⁶ ‘Romantic hermeneutics here came to his [Dilthey’s] assistance, since, as we saw, it took no account whatsoever of the historical nature of experience....[F]or Romantic hermeneutics every encounter with a text is an encounter of the spirit with itself. Every text is strange enough to present a problem, and yet familiar enough to be fundamentally intelligible even when we know nothing about it except that it is text, writing, an expression of mind.’ (Truth and Method, p 240.)

¹⁷ I would add the qualification that both Heidegger and Gadamer acknowledge that Count Yorck von Wartenburg had anticipated in an unsystematic form the sense in which philosophy should take into

Gadamer's use of Heidegger: the historicity of human existence

As I understand it,¹⁸ Gadamer is interested in appropriating Heidegger's thought for the human sciences because Heidegger affirmed the fundamental temporality - and hence, historicity - of the process of understanding. Above all, according to Heidegger, the specific situation or situatedness of the interpreter is a fundamental factor in the process of understanding. This is known as the 'fore-structure of understanding', in that understanding is never simply an understanding of 'what is there', but always involves specific 'fore-conceptions' derived from the concrete life-context or horizon of the interpreter. This is different from Romantic hermeneutics or the empathetic tradition (the latter two I take to be equivalent for our purposes), because we are no longer seeking to draw on the resources of an a-historical or trans-historical universal human nature. Gadamer explains that, in Heidegger's view, it is only in the specific, living context and horizon of his own involvements and concerns that the interpreter can understand at all.

This is what I mean by saying that Gadamer appears to advocate the relativity of all understanding. In his appropriation of Heidegger at this point, he argues that all understanding of the other, of the past, takes place within the specific framework of one's own particular concerns; the framework of the present situation provides the interpreter with specific fore-meanings and fore-conceptions, which are of necessity an integral part of all understanding. Because of this, a true understanding of the past will always be different for each concrete situation or horizon within which or from which the understanding takes place, given that all understanding of the past is co-determined by the present situation or context. Accordingly, there is no one valid understanding of a text for all time, and the understanding of the text which was valid for the original readers is not valid for those who belong to a subsequent situation. 'Not just occasionally but always, the meaning of a text goes beyond its author.'¹⁹

account the fundamental historicity of existence (M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), pp 449f; *Truth and Method*, p 262).

¹⁸ The following is intended as a summary of *Truth and Method*, pp 265-271 and following.

¹⁹ *Truth and Method*, p 296.

The question must be, then, how this apparent ‘relativism’ of understanding, which takes all understanding to be relative to the present context, can be squared with Gadamer’s stated concern with the objective content or *Sache* (=subject-matter) of the text. To be sure, Gadamer does not speak of ‘relativism’ on the one hand and ‘objectivism’ on the other, but when he says that there is no one valid understanding and that true understanding of the same text etc. is different for each situation, then this does appear to be a species of relativism; and when he urges a concern with the content or reference of the text, then this does appear to be a species of objectivism.

It could also be objected that different word-groups are involved i.e. when Gadamer claims that all readings must be related to the present context, he says that we cannot have objective knowledge of the past, but the word for objective here is *objektiv* (or *gegenständlich*); and when Gadamer talks about the objective content (=subject-matter) of the text, he uses the term *Sache* (also *Sachlichkeit*).²⁰ The difference in words is indeed important, but it does not to my mind relieve the apparent tension in Gadamer’s thought. For when he talks about a concern with or agreement with ‘*die Sache*’ of the text, this surely appears to conflict with a relativist view which says there is no ‘objective’ understanding of the text but only a plurality of interpretations related to the particular, local interests of the interpreters. This blend of conservative and radical elements of Gadamer’s thought obviously requires explanation. Put another way, the question is how Gadamer can understand the words *objektiv* and *sachlich* in an antithetical sense in spite of the obvious overlap of meaning which is reflected in the fact that they can both be translated into English as ‘objective’.

²⁰ On ‘objective knowledge (of the past)’, see *Truth and Method*, p 301 where ‘*gegenständliches Wissen*’ is translated as ‘objective knowledge’, and pp 304 and 309, where ‘*objektiver Erkenntnis*’ is also translated as ‘objective knowledge’. (See *Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), pp 307, 309 and 314 respectively.) In the context I think the German expressions are identical in meaning and hence the translators were right to use the same English expression.

Overcoming the subject-object distinction according to Gadamer

Thus far, we have focused on the fact that in the tradition of romantic hermeneutics, there is a universal human nature which is in principle the same for both past and present. And yet, in apparent contradiction to this, the romantic tradition is known for its emphasis on the mystery of individuality, which involves an emphasis on the difference and distinctiveness of people in the past. The past author is regarded as an 'individual', that is as unique and to that extent opaque to understanding for other individuals. However, as we have seen, according to romantic hermeneutics, the individual of the past can be understood by the individual in the present, or, put more generally, one individual can understand another individual, because all individuality arises from a universal 'life' or human nature which is everywhere the same. And so the presuppositions of otherness and sameness exist in tension with each other in romantic hermeneutics.

But how is it possible for such presuppositions to co-exist without an intolerable tension? How is it possible for individuals to be absolutely other and yet to be in the most fundamental sense absolutely the same? In response, I would propose that they are not 'absolutely the same' and 'absolutely different' in the same sense. They are the same on the level of subjectivity or aesthetics; they are different (or 'other') on the level of objectivity or on the level of cognitive, objective beliefs or commitments. Hence I can understand the past - whether a past author or past event - by entering into the 'spirit' of the past, i.e. by empathy. This constitutes an 'aesthetic' appreciation of the past because I no longer ask what is true or false in past texts, or in past expressions or actions. We may call this a 'subjective' appreciation of the past, provided that 'subjective' is not here understood in the usual sense of 'distorted by personal prejudices' but in the more technical sense that the objective truth claim of the past has been suspended, and in the sense that we empathise with the point of view of the other (i.e. share in his subjectivity). We may even talk of 'agreeing' with the past author etc. in this 'subjective' or 'aesthetic' sense, because we suspend our own point of view and see things from their point of view and understand why they spoke or acted as they did. But we do not 'agree' with them in the normal sense of the word by receiving their claim as objectively valid, not so much

because we disagree with them, but because neither agreement nor disagreement are any longer an issue on the 'objective' (or cognitive) level.

And so, this shows us how the 'agreement' in this qualified and analogical sense - i.e. in the 'aesthetic' or 'subjective' sense - actually precludes agreement in the normal sense of the word. The viewpoint of the past author, although (or precisely because) it is so close to us in the 'subjective' sense, is actually completely alien to us in the 'objective' sense. We adopt the other's viewpoint absolutely as our own - on the basis of a universally shared subjectivity, which we share with the author and everyone else who has ever lived; yet on the objective level we never even consider the viewpoint of the other; it is methodologically excluded.

R.E.Palmer observes that Gadamer's philosophical approach originates from his dissatisfaction with contemporary aesthetic theory. Gadamer's primary thesis on this score is that we should not make an ultimate separation between aesthetic experience of a work of art and the truth claim which the work of art makes on us. Palmer gives a vivid example of this: Milton's work, *Paradise Lost*, presupposes many theological beliefs which (supposedly) we cannot today accept. However, we can still read it as great work of art - 'for the greatness of its style, the grandeur of its conception, its imaginative vigor - not because it is true. Such an argument separates beauty from truth, and ultimately we see the epic as a "noble monument to dead ideas"'.²¹ This demonstrates quite vividly the close link between aesthetic appreciation and dismissal of any objective claim. Palmer goes on to comment:

Ironically this false view of a literary text masquerades as the ultimate in open-mindedness, in spite of the fact that the present is presupposed as correct, as not to be put to the test, i.e. as absolute. Yet the present is to be suspended because the past cannot compete with it. Behind this open-minded suspension of prejudice is the unwillingness to risk our judgments; the past stands opposed to us as something almost irrelevant...²²

²¹ R.E.Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p 181.

²² Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, p 181.

This adverse comment on the ideal of aesthetic appreciation corresponds to Gadamer's own position, and it is all the more pertinent when we consider that in romantic hermeneutics the aesthetic approach becomes a universal method for understanding not only past literary works but also for understanding all aspects of the past. The point is that because we fence off the subjective/aesthetic appreciation of an author from a consideration of his objective truth claim, then we regard our own objective beliefs, opinions, commitments etc. as being beyond criticism. This is the true nature and consequence of the division between subject and object, which needs to be overcome.

We can see from this much the drift of Gadamer's thought when he calls for a receptivity to the subject-matter or objective content (*die Sache*). We have seen that in the hermeneutical tradition immediately prior to Gadamer, there was a radical separation between subjective and objective modes of understanding, in that there was a search for agreement (or rather, unity) on the subjective level, but at the same time a surrender of any search for agreement on the objective level. But this has the effect of making our own beliefs unassailable. Gadamer calls for a renewed consideration of the objective claim which comes to us from the past, that is, he calls for an attempt to find understanding in terms of agreement in the subject-matter, because he wishes to overcome this dichotomy; he wishes to overcome the absolutising of the standpoint of the present.

Gadamer argues that when someone seeks to understand another person from that person's own point of view - that is, when someone seeks to understand by transposing themselves into the other person's horizon - then the one who is seeking to understand 'has, as it were, stopped trying to reach an agreement. He himself cannot be reached. By factoring the other person's standpoint into what he is claiming to say, we are making our own standpoint safely unattainable'.²³ Undoubtedly, 'factoring the other person's standpoint into what he [the author] is claiming to say' means that we regard the truth claim of the author as related specifically to their point of view, which we enter into empathetically, but do not consider objectively - and so leave our own point of view untouched and unquestioned.

²³ Truth and Method, p 303.

The question of horizons

Possibly the most famous aspect of Gadamer's philosophical theory is the idea of the 'fusion of horizons', i.e. that understanding takes place as a fusion between the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the author. However, it must be remembered that for Gadamer, there are ultimately not two horizons but only one. Or, more accurately put, the two horizons are not to be understood as 'closed' horizons, and it is a common fundamental methodological error to regard them so. This is the error of regarding the past author as coming from a specific point of view which we ourselves do not share, or share only in the reduced 'empathetic' sense. In the latter case we regard the two horizons as ultimately separate from and closed to each other. This is why, in Gadamer's view, we should not regard the 'two horizons' as ultimately separate. This is why we must regard the past as having something true and relevant to say to the present. The methodological assumption of mutual irrelevance or of two separate horizons is precisely what places the present horizon beyond criticism.²⁴

However, it is at this point that we can see the subtlety and complexity of Gadamer's philosophy. Gadamer insists that in talking about 'one horizon' he is not thinking of an unbroken continuity between the past horizon and that of the present, but rather wishes to bring out the tensions between the two as sharply as possible.²⁵ But how then does this fit in with his statement that there is really only one horizon, enclosing both past and present? I think it should be explained thus: it is precisely when we think in terms of two closed horizons that we bring to an end the tension that exists between them. Thinking of the two horizons as being enclosed within a wider, single horizon (as Gadamer does) means that this path of peaceful co-existence of two closed horizons is no longer an option. Similarly, seeking to understand the past as having something true and relevant to say to the present should not be understood as implying an unbroken continuity between the past and the present, but rather should be understood as a refusal to immunise the present from the past by reducing 'agreement' to a matter of empathy or aesthetic appreciation. Trying to

²⁴ Truth and Method, pp 303-4.

²⁵ Truth and Method, p 306 (cf p 295).

understand the past as true and relevant to the present brings out the real tension between the two.

The similarity between Barth and Gadamer

I began this chapter with two questions which I wished to address in connection with the similarities between Gadamer and Barth. The first of these was that of the apparent tension between Barth's relativism and his objectivism. If, as I have claimed, Barth believed that our grasp of the past is always and only relative, then how is it that he could call for a return to a concern with the objective content (*Sache*) of the text? I noted that there seemed to be a similar tension in the thought of both Gadamer and Barth, but now I wish to draw out more specifically where the similarity lies.

Barth's starting point was in the problem of the hidden horizons of contemporary scientific, historical, dogmatic and exegetical method. His problem was that in such 'method' the standpoint of the present is absolutised and fenced off from any claim which the past might make on the present. Once we grasp that this was Barth's starting point, then we can see that his concern with the *Sache* of the Bible does not mean that we can be confident of a direct grasp of the content of Scripture without needing to take into account the cultural and historical tensions between Scripture and ourselves. I believe Barth means just the opposite: he means, as with Gadamer, that these tensions are to be taken seriously and not evacuated by the 'empathetic' approach which removes clashes of objective claims simply by suspending the question of objective agreement.

Similarly, Barth's insistence that he must 'almost forget that he is not the author' is, I believe, equivalent to Gadamer's insistence that in reality there is only one horizon between the past and present; but also, as with Gadamer, this is not a naïve assimilation of the past to the present or a neat coincidence of the concerns of the past with those of the present. Again, I believe Barth means just the opposite. He means to put an end to the peaceful co-existence of the two horizons, which is the normal method of regarding the past horizon as something fundamentally alien and in need of interpretation before it can be made relevant to the present.

For me, the most compelling aspect of the parallels between Gadamer and Barth is to be found in Barth's refusal to make an independent concern out of the author's own viewpoint. As I mentioned above, Gadamer stated that making the other's point of view a specific factor in the process of understanding or interpretation means that we are making our own point of view unassailable. I believe that this corresponds to Barth's own position, and I would like now to look again at Barth's early disagreement with Bultmann in the light of this question.

Bultmann and Barth: the 'Spirit of Christ' and the 'other spirits'

We are concerned, then, with Barth's difference from Bultmann over the second edition of Romans, at the time when they appeared to be in at least relative agreement. As I understand it, the crucial difference was that Bultmann did consider the particular, historical and individual 'point of view' of Paul as an independent factor which needed to be taken into account in the process of interpretation. That is, Bultmann sought to take into account the actual opinions of Paul as something historically relative and to be distinguished from the real significance of what Paul has to say to us today. We should distinguish between the 'other spirits' which speak in Paul as a consequence of his historical context, and the Spirit of Christ which we find in his words, and which is still binding on us today. We are able to make such a distinction because we ourselves have our own relation to the Spirit of Christ, to the real subject matter or *Sache* of the text; this is what makes us able to see where Paul's words are in line with the Spirit of Christ and where they diverge from this Spirit.

Barth's response to this is instructive, because it is here that he states the assumption of completeness. He calls this the relationship of faithfulness (*Treueverhältnis*). By this is meant the assumption that what Paul is saying is a unity, which means that the expositor should work to show how the seemingly divergent and disparate elements of Paul's thought or expression may form a coherent whole.²⁶ What is striking here is that Barth

²⁶ 'Therefore my conclusion is that in no case can it be a question of playing off the Spirit of Christ, the "subject matter," [die *Sache*] in such a way against the "other spirits," that in the name of the former

makes no claim that Paul's thought or expressions really are a unity, whether as something he knows in advance or as something he has discovered through studying the text. What is involved is merely a methodological assumption.²⁷ And it is very significant that when we turn to Gadamer, we find the same guiding assumption. Gadamer speaks specifically of an anticipation or rather of a 'fore-conception of completeness'.²⁸ This fore-conception, which appears in Barth as well as in Gadamer, is clearly related to the task of being open to the complete truth of what is said, and has nothing to do with regarding the text as 'consistent but false' or consistent from its own point of view - which would be a return to the Romantic conception.²⁹

certain passages are praised, but certain others, where Paul is not speaking "from the subject matter" are belittled. Rather it is a question of seeing and making clear how the "Spirit of Christ" is the crisis in which the whole finds itself. Everything is *litera*, the voice of "other" spirits, and whether and in how far everything can be understood also in the context of the "subject matter" as the voice of the *spiritus* (of Christ) is the question by which the *litera* must be studied.' ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 127 - emphasizes Barth's.)

²⁷ This for me becomes clear in the way that Barth states that everything in the text can be understood as the varied other spirits; seeking to grasp them as a unity in relation to the Spirit of Christ is an assumption which does not follow from their intrinsic quality. One is not compelled to understand them as a unity, but seeking to grasp them as a unity is a condition of genuine understanding. ('The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', pp 127-8.)

²⁸ Conlin also makes a comparison between Barth and Gadamer on the issue of the 'fore-conception of completeness' ('A Hermeneutical Triangle', pp 179f); however, she does not make her comparison on the basis of Barth's concept of *Treueverhältnis*. Characteristically, she distinguishes between Barth and Gadamer on the grounds that Barth's concern was theologically specific (p 181).

²⁹ Gadamer writes of the 'fore-conception of completeness' as 'a formal condition of all understanding...[W]hen we read a text, we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken - i.e., the text is not intelligible - do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied...The fore-conception of completeness that guides all our understanding is, then, always determined by the specific content. Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said...It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to "understand" the text, psychologically or historically, as another's opinion. The prejudice of completeness, then, implies not only this formal element - that a text should completely express its meaning - but also that what it says should be the complete truth.' (Truth and Method, pp 293-4.)

The question must of course arise as to whether this assumption will falsify the material, for if the text does not form a unity, as must be the case to some extent, then the assumption that it does form a unity will surely obscure this fact. However, I think that Gadamer emphasises this as an assumption not to fore-close the question of whether the text is truly a unity, nor whether it speaks truth; rather, he is seeking to formulate what is involved in understanding as such. Grasping at least the possibility of the truth - indeed, the complete truth - of what is said is an important precondition for understanding. This is as opposed to assuming in advance that the author is proceeding from a historically limited perspective which would mean we have to distinguish between what proceeds from the author's distinctive point of view and the real substance of what the author is saying. Of course, it must be the case that the author is proceeding from a historically limited point of view, but if we make this factor into a primary assumption, then we have curtailed the task of real listening and understanding, and have effectively immunised our own point of view from what the past may have to say to us.

We see Gadamer's perspective anticipated in Barth's comments that it is only when an anticipation of completeness with regard to the text actually fails that we should begin to write 'about' Paul, which I take to mean considering Paul in terms of 'another' individual coming from a distinct point of view of his own. Barth clearly understands this last as a secondary, derivative situation, in which the primary effort of understanding has failed.³⁰

Now, considered in theological terms, Barth's position that we must make a methodological assumption of the complete truth of the biblical texts seems to have much in common with the orthodox doctrine of inspiration. Barth acknowledged that his approach did have a certain amount in common with the traditional doctrine; however, I believe that his approach is to be distinguished from orthodoxy because of the rôle of application in his hermeneutical orientation.

³⁰ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition', p 128: 'I hold that it is impossible for anyone to do justice to any writer, to be able really to bring any writer to speak again, if he does not dare to assume that hypothesis, does not enter into that relationship of faithfulness to him. To speak about someone seems to me to be hopelessly condemned to speak past him, and to seal his grave tighter.'

Application as an integral part of understanding in Gadamer and Barth

It seems clear to me that Barth and Gadamer had this in common: they both believed that application is an integral part of understanding.³¹ This is meant in the radical sense, that understanding only takes place to the extent that it is also application; where this factor is not taken into account, then the reading of the text is subject to distortion by hidden expectations of application. I have looked at this aspect of Barth's hermeneutics in my previous chapter, and I would like to show now how it signifies a crucial clarification of what I have been saying about the anticipation of the complete truth of the text.

What I mean is this: the assumption of complete truth is not a 'theoretical' assumption; that is, it is not an assumption that the text is completely true in and of itself apart from the question of its application and its relevance to the present situation. Indeed, in a very real sense, if we were to regard the text as 'completely true' in its own intrinsic content, that is considered in abstraction from its present application, then we would have missed the point of why we must regard it as 'completely true' in the first place. The reason why we regard it as completely true in the first place is because we wish to avoid projecting a distinct horizon of the past, separate from our own, which would enable us to distinguish between what is 'historically conditioned' in the past on the one hand and what is of permanent significance on the other. As I have argued, such a distinction may simply reflect our own criteria of what is and what is not of permanent significance. And if we were to regard the text as completely true in the theoretical sense, as a quality the text has in itself, then we would again be projecting a distinct horizon for the text which is distinct from our own. If we were to make a basic distinction between what the text means in itself (theoretical understanding) and what the text can mean for today (practical application),

³¹ On this general point, I am in agreement with Conlin, who states that 'Gadamer's insistence on the fact that understanding always involves application is analogous to Barth's conviction that appropriation is interdependent with the first and second moments of biblical interpretation.' ('A Hermeneutical Triangle', p 191.) 'Appropriation' here refers to the 'third stage' of biblical interpretation (applicatio), and the 'first and second moments' refer to the stages of observation and reflection respectively (see part (C) of my fourth chapter).

then we would be falling back into the fallacy of making an ultimate distinction between the horizon of the past and the horizon of the present, with the consequent danger that we will subordinate the horizon of the past to the standpoint of the present.

We may consider by way of illustration the fact that a contemporary representative of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture will normally regard the task of establishing what is there in the text in itself as something prior to the task of interpreting or applying the text for today. Indeed, he will often seek to vindicate the intrinsic truth of the text precisely by projecting a separate horizon for the text, and will state that a problematic aspect of the text can be shown to be true or valid when we consider the text's meaning from within its original horizon or situation as opposed to that of today. This is in effect a kind of empathy, in which the interpreter transposes himself into the horizon of the past by suspending the horizon of the present. It is not, of course, equivalent to the 'empathy' advocated in critical exegesis, which has no wish to vindicate the complete truth of Scripture. However, in respect of the question of application, the advocate of orthodoxy is in this case employing something closely analogous to the empathetic approach, and is also at risk of using criteria drawn from the present to distinguish between what was relevant only for the biblical time and what is still relevant today, so that in the process of application the text is subordinated to the present.

Of course, this is hardly the whole story with regard to contemporary representatives of the orthodox position; to be accurate we have to recognise that they are actually deeply suspicious of making too many distinctions between what the text meant in its own time and what it means for today. To them, the assumption that the modern world presents a special task of interpretation distinct from what the text meant in its own time entails the 'Liberal' fallacy of pretending to be concerned with the text but actually making it die the death of a thousand modern re-interpretations. They would say that the projection of a horizon for the biblical text distinct from the modern world is a deceptive strategy which enables us to evade what the Bible commands us to do and believe. Notwithstanding my comments in the last paragraph, it may well appear that the contemporary orthodox view fits Gadamer's criterion of assuming that ultimately there is really only one horizon between reader and text, and that, just like Gadamer, it recognises that projecting a distinct

horizon for the biblical text has the effect of placing the 'modern' viewpoint beyond criticism.

However, I believe that there is a crucial difference between the orthodox approach and the approach of Gadamer (and, I believe, there is a corresponding difference between the orthodox approach and that of Barth). In so far as the orthodox approach advocates the direct applicability of the text to modern situations, then there is a difference from Gadamer and Barth, who, in my view, do not believe in such direct applicability. This requires explanation.

I think that on the one hand Barth shares with Liberal thought the assumption that when conservative exegesis emphasises the direct applicability of the text then it is covering up the actual tension between the text and our own world, but on the other hand he shares with conservative thought the assumption that Liberal exegesis represents an attempt to immunise the present horizon from the biblical text. I think I understand Barth correctly when I say that for him (as against the 'conservative' approach) the biblical text is not directly applicable to the present; if we think that it is directly applicable, then this means that we are unaware of how the present horizon (considered as distinct from the biblical horizon) is predetermining our reading. Again, as in Gadamer, I believe Barth takes the position that application is an integral part of understanding precisely in order to bring out the tensions between the horizon of the text and our own fully, and, as I said, to put an end to the peaceful co-existence of the two horizons. Put another way: there are two ways of neutralising the tension between the text and the present: one is to assume a natural continuity between the text and the present, which in effect assumes a single, continuous horizon without tension; the other is to recognise the distinction between the horizons but to surrender the attempt to bring them together in a single horizon. Barth - and, I believe, Gadamer - choose the harder road, in that they assume the existence of two horizons in tension with each other, but require that nevertheless they are fused into one, single, unitary horizon.³²

³² Note how Barth wrote to Harnack regarding the resurrection of Christ: 'And I shall gladly confess to you that I would a hundred times rather take the side of the No, the refusal to believe which you proclaim...than the artifices of a "positive" [=orthodox] theology which end up by letting what is

However, there is a possible argument that it is Bultmann rather than Barth who does justice to the full subtlety of Gadamer's position. For, as we will now see, Gadamer does speak of the scholarly task of projecting a provisional past horizon, and it is arguable that Bultmann's approach was more truly representative of this aspect of Gadamer's thought than was that of Barth.

The projection of a 'provisional' past horizon

We have been considering the fact that Gadamer does not mean to cover up the tension between the 'two horizons' by postulating a single, continuous horizon between past and present. On the contrary, he postulates a single horizon so that the tensions involved are not covered up or concealed. What we are concerned with here is that this leads to a relative acknowledgement of the productivity of the sense of historical distance which we find in historical-critical consciousness: 'The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own.'³³ However, that this is only a provisional projection is demonstrated by Gadamer's further words: 'Projecting a historical horizon...is only one phase in the process of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the process of understanding, a real fusing of horizons occurs - which means that as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded.'³⁴

If we are to view Bultmann's use of historical criticism in the light of Gadamer's understanding of the historical task, then we must ask whether Bultmann's projection of a past historical horizon belongs to the transitional 'phase in the process of understanding',

incomprehensible appear under control again as entirely comprehensible and evident...' ('An Answer to Professor von Harnack's Open Letter', p 180.)

³³ Truth and Method, p 306.

³⁴ Truth and Method, pp 306-7.

to be ‘simultaneously superseded’ in a fusion of horizons, or whether what we in fact see in Bultmann is the projection of a past horizon which is ‘solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness’.

There can be no doubt that Barth understood Bultmann according to the latter alternative, and he thereby lumped Bultmann together with those who were doomed to talk ‘about’ Paul, and hence (as Barth put it) to talk past him and to seal his grave ever tighter. However, on the other side, Bultmann clearly understood Barth’s refusal to make serious use of historical criticism as a failure to preserve the tensions between the past and present horizons, and as a return to what Gadamer refers to as a ‘naive assimilation’ of the two horizons - or, in theological terms, as a return to the orthodox doctrine of inspiration.³⁵

And so we would seem to have reached an impasse, in which the whole question turns on how Gadamer is to be interpreted and applied to the very different exegetical approaches of Barth and Bultmann. He himself at least did not explicitly favour one over the other.

As a way beyond this impasse, I would like to open up again the question which I mentioned at the close of my last chapter - that is the question of to what extent Bultmann may have sought to move beyond the ‘empathetic’ tradition in such a way as to be in fundamental continuity or harmony with that tradition, rather than in basic criticism of that tradition. To examine this question more closely, we will have to take a look at Bultmann’s explicit reflections on hermeneutics in his essay on the subject.

³⁵ cf further A.C.Thiselton, *The Two Horizons*, pp 317-9; although Thiselton certainly does not criticise Barth for holding to the orthodox doctrine of Scripture, nevertheless he clearly thinks Barth falls short of Gadamer’s insight in that he fails to maintain a tension between the two horizons of past and present, which works to the detriment of exegetical objectivity. Further, Conlin similarly argues that Barth is to be distinguished from Gadamer in that he, Barth, does not take into account the issue of historical distance (‘A Hermeneutical Triangle’, p 186).

Bultmann's relationship to the empathetic tradition

Burnett argues that Bultmann never really moved beyond the empathetic tradition of historical and textual interpretation, and points to Bultmann's essay 'The Problem of Hermeneutics' to substantiate this.³⁶ Now, it is true that Bultmann regards himself as standing in the hermeneutical tradition of Schleiermacher and Dilthey. Indeed, he writes: 'So far as Dilthey characterizes the relationship between author and expositor as the conditioning factor for the possibility of comprehension of the text, he has, in fact, laid bare the presupposition of all interpretation which has comprehension as its basis.'³⁷ This in itself shows how much Bultmann believed his position to be in line with the so-called empathetic tradition as we have portrayed it. However, we must also take into account the fact that Bultmann distanced himself from the empathetic tradition, in such a way as to modify it significantly. Specifically, he challenged the 'romanticist' elements i.e. that the relationship between the author and expositor should be understood in terms of an aesthetic 'feeling-with' or psychological affinity. Instead, he argued, the relationship should be understood in terms of a relationship to the subject-matter (i.e. *Sache*) of the text.³⁸ Since this is the same terminology as that used by Barth, we have to ask if Bultmann has re-interpreted the empathetic tradition in such a way as to be in line with whatever hermeneutical insights we have ascribed to Barth, so that the reason for Barth and Bultmann's disagreement would have to be sought elsewhere.

However, it seems to me, after due consideration, that Bultmann does show continuity with the empathetic tradition, even in the specific sense of 'romanticism'. We may recall that in Bultmann's early criticism of Barth, he said that there were 'other spirits' which spoke in the text - other, that is, than the 'Spirit of Christ', the latter presumably representing the true and enduring message of what Paul has to say to us today. At this early stage Bultmann did not state in detail how one was meant to distinguish between the Spirit of Christ and the 'other spirits', but later he would come to speak of the 'other spirits' in terms of the false objectifications of the self-understanding which is being

³⁶ Burnett, *Theological Exegesis*, p 203.

³⁷ 'The Problem of Hermeneutics' in Bultmann, *Essays Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p 240 (234-261) (emphasis Bultmann's).

³⁸ 'The Problem of Hermeneutics', pp 240-241.

expressed in Scripture. Now, these false objectifications which make up the ancient world-view conflict with the objectifications which make up the modern (scientific) world-view. If we simply repeat the New Testament faith-statements, without interpretation, then we experience a clash of world-views. It then appears to us (wrongly) that what is being asked of us in accepting the content of the New Testament is that we accept the ancient world-view. Bultmann sees this as a misunderstanding; the acceptance of the New Testament claim does not involve the acceptance of an ancient world-view, and indeed is not about 'world-views' at all. In order truly to understand the New Testament text, we have to encounter it on a level which has nothing to do with world-views, whether in terms of accepting the world-view of the ancients, or even in terms of re-interpreting the faith-statements in accordance with our own world-view. A world-view is always an external objectification of a particular self-understanding, and the encounter should take place only on the level of 'self-understanding' - which is also designated as 'subjectivity' or, 'the question of one's own existence'.³⁹

Now if I briefly review my understanding of the empathetic tradition, I hope it will become clear where I think there is a resemblance of this tradition to Bultmann's position. As I understand it, the empathetic tradition seeks to interpret the texts in terms of the general forms of human experience which are enshrined within it. The 'objective' forms which such life-experiences assume in the text appear to the interpreter as the product of alien, relative and dispensable historical influences. According to the empathetic tradition, the real meaning of the texts is disclosed only through participation in the inner life-experience of the author, and this can only be attained by critically distancing oneself from the alien historical influences which codetermine the objective formulations found in the texts. This corresponds to my discussion earlier in this chapter when I considered the romantic/empathetic conception of sharing in the subjectivity of the author, which requires

³⁹ On world-views or *Weltanschauung* (or *Weltbild*) in general, see Bultmann, 'The Crisis in Belief', in Bultmann, *Essays*, pp 7f (1-21); cf further Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann *Letters*, p 88. On 'subjectivity', cf 'The Problem of Hermeneutics', pp 255-6; on 'the question of one's own existence', see 'The Problem of Hermeneutics', p 256 ('[O]nly those who are stirred by the question of their own existence can hear the claim which the text makes'); also on the question of 'existence' as a hermeneutical criterion see Bultmann, 'Theological Exegesis' in Robinson (ed.), *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 243ff (236-256).

the suspension of objective truth claims and the suppression of the tensions between the objective commitments of the author and reader. Now it appears to me that Bultmann's procedure closely resembles this general approach, in that he believes that we should remove the clash between the author and reader on the level of 'objectification' and bring out the possibility of encounter on the level of self-understanding or subjectivity.

But then, on the other hand, in what respect does Bultmann differ from the empathetic tradition - or, more precisely, from the 'romanticist' element within it? Basically, Bultmann would not have agreed that understanding occurs through 'sharing in the subjectivity of the author'. He did not believe in the concept of psychological affinity or congeniality between the author and reader which would make this possible. He denied, in effect, that there was any such 'general human nature' as was posited by the romantic tradition; instead, authentic self-understanding takes place only through concrete encounters. Put another way: in the romantic way of thinking, the essence of the past somehow lives on in the inner life of the present reader, and so to understand a past text on a more profound level, the reader needs only to draw on his own inner resources which are accessible through introspection or psychological analysis etc. Bultmann completely disagreed with this. According to him, the reader has no access to the past through his own inner life. This is because the real self exists only in encounters, and when anyone tries to reflect on his own inner life as something existing apart from such encounters, he has nothing but an empty or deceptive abstraction.

I think the most crucial thing to grasp about Barth's response to Bultmann was this: he consistently held that Bultmann belonged to that way of thinking which made the text into a predicate of the self-consciousness of the believer, and that when Christian or biblical faith statements are re-interpreted according to Bultmann's method, then all that remains is an occurrence within the bounds of the believer's consciousness (i.e. as in the romantic conception). And so Barth believed that he could argue against Bultmann by emphasising the priority of the object of faith over the subjectivity or self-consciousness of the believer.

Bultmann naturally responded to this by saying that Barth had confused two philosophical approaches which were radically opposed to one another.⁴⁰

Although I am inclined to think that Barth was basically right on this issue, I do not intend to advance any definitive argument that this was the case. For my purposes, it is more important to attain a clarification about the link between Barth's approach to historical criticism and his urgent concern about that way of thinking which supposes that the 'true' sense of a past text - especially a biblical text - becomes accessible in and through the self-consciousness of the reader or believer. Whether or not his understanding of Bultmann was correct, it at least illustrates where Barth's difficulty with historical criticism lay. With respect to Bultmann, we may note that he (Bultmann) at least closely resembles the romanticist tradition as analysed by Gadamer, in that there is a split in subject and object whereby the content of a pre-critical text has to be understood as the external objectification of a 'subjective' self-understanding.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Bultmann cites Barth's criticism of him as follows: 'They [the propositions of the Christian Confession] are doubtless all related to human existence. They make possible and give a foundation to the Christian understanding of them, and so they also become - in an altered form - definitions of human existence. But they are not so originally. Originally they define the being and the activity of the God who is different from man and who confronts man: of Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And so for that reason they are not reducible to propositions about the inner life of man.' (CD III/2, p 446.) Bultmann responds: 'The last sentence betrays a complete misunderstanding of what existential interpretation is. This is not the "inner life" of man at all, which can be brought under observation while setting aside what is different from it and what it encounters (whether environment, fellow-man or God) - say, from a view which has to do with the psychology of religion, but at all events not from an existential one. For the latter seeks to contemplate and to understand the real existence (in history) of man, who exists only in living connection with what is "different" from him - only in encounters.' ('The Problem of Hermeneutics', pp 259-260.)

⁴¹ cf Bultmann's words in correspondence with Barth: 'At root the [theological] controversy is always with a specific human self-understanding. For the Reformation it was that which underlay Roman Catholic teaching and practice; for modern theology it is that which underlies the modern view of the world and man. The mistake of theology for more than two centuries was that it did understand the theme correctly, but it did not wrestle with the self-understanding of modern man, but with its scientific objectifications...' (Karl Barth-Rudolf Bultmann Letters, p 91 - emphasis his). cf also 'New Testament and Mythology', p 35: 'We are compelled to ask whether all this mythological language [of the New Testament] is not simply an attempt to express the meaning of the historical figure of Jesus and the events of his life... If that be so then we can dispense with the objective form in which they are cast.' Although I am not pursuing the question

Barth's view of the spirit/letter distinction

Barth's relation to the empathetic tradition will be further clarified for us if we attend to his comments on the spirit/letter distinction as it is used in the interpretation of biblical texts or Christian tradition. In this context, 'spirit' designates the true, inward sense of the text, and 'letter' represents its external, dispensable formulations. This duality corresponds to the conceptuality of the empathetic tradition; this is especially evident when it is understood that the 'spirit' refers not only to the inward sense of the text but also to the inward resources of one's own self through which one is able to recognise and retrieve the inward sense of the text.⁴²

Now, Barth traces this form of the 'empathetic' approach back to the theologian and dramatist G.E.Lessing. He makes this connection in a section of the first part volume of the *Dogmatics*. Barth explains Lessing's view as follows:

Lessing is well acquainted with a proof of Christianity through history. But it must be "the proof of spirit and of power."⁴³ That is, history does not prove any truth for us so long as it is the "contingent truth of history" merely reported to us by others and not truth "felt" and "experienced" by ourselves... [Quoting Lessing] "Religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; they taught it because it is true. By its inner truth, scriptural traditions must be explained, and all the traditions in

in detail at this point, I would add the comment that further study of where Bultmann stands in relation to the empathetic tradition would need to take into account his comments on Dilthey and comparable writers such as B.Croce and R.G.Collingwood in his Gifford lectures entitled *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957), especially pp 110-137.

⁴² As F.Watson explains, this letter/spirit distinction was in fact used explicitly in the empathetic (Romantic) tradition; he also observes how this is linked historically with the development of historical criticism: 'The Enlightenment's incorporation of the sceptical tradition within its historical-critical research creates space for the Romantic celebration of the liberation of the spirit from the letter.' (Text and Truth, p 131.) Thus we see again the paradoxical combination of critical detachment with empathetic engagement which characterises the empathetic tradition.

⁴³ Barth is referring to Lessing's famous essay 'On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power', English translation in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, edited by H.Chadwick (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1957), pp 51-6.

the world cannot give it inner truth if it does not have it”⁴⁴ ...And Lessing obviously regards this inner, spiritual truth as something quite accessible to us and apprehensible by us. We can judge its *presence in virtue of our own feeling and experience. This is why he appeals from Luther’s writings to Luther’s spirit...*⁴⁵ from the letter of the Bible to the spirit of the Bible...⁴⁶

Barth proceeds with the following comment:

When we are able to eliminate our non-contemporaneity with Christ and the apostles by putting ourselves on the same soil as them or putting them on the same soil as us, so that, sharing in the same prophetic Spirit and having the same measure of inner truth in our own feeling, we can discuss with them the gross and net value of their words...then the concept of the Word of God is humanised in such a way that it is no wonder people prefer to use it comparatively rarely and in quotation marks...For all our respect for the greatness and vitality of history, it is we the living who have right on our side and who thus finally fix and manipulate the norm and the conditions of this togetherness [with Christ and the apostles]. The present Church, however historically it may feel and think, speaks the last word as the heir and interpreter of history.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Referring to Lessing’s publications of Reimarus’ fragments (cited in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, p 18).

⁴⁵ Referring to Lessing’s Anti-Goeze (cited in *Lessing’s Theological Writings*, p 23).

⁴⁶ CD I/1, p 146 (emphasis mine). (cf Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London: SCM Press, 1972), pp 254f.)

⁴⁷ CD I/1, p 147 (emphasis mine). cf CD I/2, p 531: ‘...[W]e are completely absolved from differentiating in the Bible between the divine and the human, the content and the form, the spirit and the letter, and then cautiously choosing the former and scornfully rejecting the latter...We are absolved from differentiating the Word of God in the Bible from other contents, infallible portions and expressions from the erroneous ones, the infallible from the fallible, and from imagining that by means of such discoveries we can create for ourselves encounters with the genuine Word of God in the Bible.’ (Emphasis mine.) See further, Barth, ‘The Word in Theology from Schleiermacher to Ritschl’, in *Theology and Church: Shorter Writings 1920-1928* (New York/Evanston: Harper Row, 1962), p 201 (200-216): ‘Does the truth of God confront man also in history?...Does it convey a knowledge which man can in no way create and establish for himself...because it is given him not by his own knowing...but is given through his being known by it and in it?...Or is history revelation because and while it pleases man so to consider history, to set God firmly in the history and to have him there, firmly fixed? Has man access to the truth of God in history, as he has or thinks he has access to history in general, by interpreting history in the light of the truth which is within himself...? In the first case, he lets himself be told truth. In the second case, he tells himself what truth is while he takes a tour through history.’ Finally, see CD I/2 p 673, where Barth writes: ‘The argument of life cannot be played off against the authority of Scripture. Nor can the latter be questioned and assailed in the name of a struggle for the spirit as opposed to the letter. The reason for this is that Scripture is itself

In this passage, we see how Barth makes a connection between the empathetic tradition, with its emphasis on the 'spirit' of the past, and the problem of subordinating the past to the perspective of the present. It may be objected that Barth does not refer here to the main exponents of the empathetic tradition mentioned so far, namely Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and refers only to Lessing. And yet it is striking that Dilthey himself, in his biography on Schleiermacher, traces what we have been calling the empathetic tradition back to Lessing as its first exponent.⁴⁸

However, granted that Barth was opposed to understanding the text through a spirit/letter distinction, nevertheless I think he did attach vital significance to the problem of spirit and letter - that is, to the experience of a distinction between what we find comprehensible in the text and what we do not. For this break-up of the text into more and less comprehensible parts is a vital indicator of the fact that the text is not directly accessible and cannot be understood immediately in terms of the presuppositions of our own time.⁴⁹ As I argued at length in my last chapter, Barth believed that we can never simply step outside of our own presuppositions, and because of this Scripture (or, if I understand him

spirit and life... - the Spirit and life of the living God Himself, who draws near to us in its faith and witness, who need not wait until spirit and life are subsequently breathed into the document of His revelation in virtue of the acceptance it finds in the Church or the insight, sympathy and congeniality which its readers bring to it...'

⁴⁸ W.Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, p 53, where Lessing appears as the first principal exponent of the 'ideal of genius', which Dilthey explains as follows: 'This new generation [i.e. after Lessing] sees in the ideal of genius it developed not merely the special, inner basis of poetic power...but the general basis of all creative power...All the powers of the soul must work together to reproduce the innermost being of the object; everything human must be revived by being understood at a depth only attainable by imagination and living empathy [Mitempfindung]...' It is, of course, a legitimate question whether Lessing should be characterised as romanticist (and so as part of the empathetic tradition) or as Enlightenment rationalist; G.Michalson comments: 'He may, as commentators are fond of saying, have one foot in nineteenth century romanticism, but in most respects Lessing is still an Enlightenment rationalist.' (*Lessing's 'Ugly Ditch': a Study of Theology and History* (London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985), p 30.) However, from my point of view the antithesis between Enlightenment rationalism and romanticism should not in any case be drawn too sharply, as I will indicate in my final chapter.

⁴⁹ cf CD I/2, p 508: 'In the biblical view of the world and man we are constantly coming up against presuppositions which are not ours, and statements and judgements we cannot accept. Therefore at bottom we cannot avoid the tensions which arise at this point.'

correctly, any past historical text) is not directly accessible to us. When it appears to be directly accessible or comprehensible to us, then we are only doing unconsciously what Liberal or empathetic exegesis does more explicitly; that is, we are unconsciously reading our own priorities into the text - and this, of course, corresponds to the naïve assimilation of horizons which I referred to earlier in this chapter. The reason why people who read the Bible in this way do not feel any real tension with the text is, I believe, because it does not occur to them (or they are too impatient) to reflect on why some parts of the text mean more to them or seem more readily intelligible than others; it does not occur to them to reflect on whether this implicit or explicit prioritising really accords with the priorities intended by the authors themselves. In Barth's view, Liberal or critical exegesis has the advantage that it at least recognises that the biblical text cannot be directly incorporated into our contemporary modes of thought and cultural presuppositions; and in this sense critical exegesis of the Liberal kind may be a legitimate 'preparation for understanding'. But it is not the understanding itself.

As I have argued, when Liberal exegesis claims to have an understanding of the text, it does so by designating a sphere or line of continuity between the world of the text and our own world - which I have termed the 'spirit' of the text, as opposed to the letter, the letter being the merely outward form or objective formulation of the 'spirit'.⁵⁰ Now - Barth obviously sought to disavow this distinction between the spirit and the letter. But this was not because he believed that there is more scope for continuity between the text and the reader than the Liberals allow. He meant, rather, that there is less scope for continuity. He meant that not only the outward form of the text, but even what the Liberals claim as the inner, spiritual continuity between the reader and the text does not entail any genuine continuity. That is, Barth agrees with the Liberal view against the conservatives that the text as it stands is not compatible with contemporary cultural presuppositions; but he

⁵⁰ cf Rumscheidt's analysis of A.Harnack's approach to historical understanding: 'If it is accepted that spirit is one, as it is by Harnack, then it is one and the same spirit which is operative in all historical phenomena and in us....[A]ll cultural, individual and spiritual factors are caused by or can be traced back to ideas, for ideas are spirit. Through the spirit a deep unity between all events and our own essence, our spiritual life is established...' (H.M.Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972); cf J.C. O'Neill, 'Adolf von Harnack and the entry of the German state into war, July-August 1914', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 55 (2002), pp 15f (1-18).)

disagrees with the Liberal compromise which designates an inward sphere of the spirit in which there is a continuity between the text and the present. Hence there remains for Barth no direct connection or line of accessibility between the reader and the text. This is, I believe, why he was able to say to Bultmann that all is 'litera' in the text, all is 'strange' to us;⁵¹ this is why he would say later that every aspect of the text is human, fallible and subject to error.⁵² This does not mean that the text is simply impossible to understand; it means, rather, that designating the inward, spiritual self as the locus of continuity is not the appropriate way for arriving at an understanding of the text.

Ultimately, I think this is because in Barth's view this inward, spiritual self is not what it seems to be. What we mean by this inner, spiritual self is in effect the sum of those judgements or ways of thinking which we cannot back up rationally, but which seem to us to be the necessary, self-evident presuppositions of rational thought and of moral and civilised behaviour. I believe that Barth's foundational insight, which he was to work out in detail in his theology, was that these seemingly self-evident judgements are actually historically conditioned; they appear to be self-evident because we cannot see beyond them or get any critical distance from them, because our way of thinking is conditioned by them. But because we experience them as self-evident, we tend to regard them as belonging to the deep structure of humanity as such. Hence we believe that we have understood the past at a profound level when we attribute to it this deep structure of humanity; but in fact, all we have done is turned the past into a reflection of our own local prejudices.

⁵¹ 'The Epistle to the Romans: Foreword to the Third Edition': 'I will certainly not argue with Bultmann which of us is the more radical, but I must still go a little further than he does and say that what speaks in the Letter to the Romans is nothing but the "others," the various "spirits" which he adduces, such as the Jewish, the popular Christian, the Hellenistic and others...Everything is litera, the voice of "other" spirits.' (p 127 - emphasis Barth's); '[W]hat I cannot understand is the invitation which Bultmann issues to me...to think and to write with Paul, that is, first of all in the entirely foreign language of his Jewish-popular-Christian-Hellenistic thought-world, and then suddenly, when this may get to be too much for me - as if something struck me as especially strange where everything is strange! - to speak "critically" about and against Paul.' (p 128 - last emphasis mine.)

⁵² CD I/2, pp 508-10.

Now, I think that the reason why Barth turned against the Liberal tradition was because in this tradition special attention was drawn to the inward, spiritual side of man as the locus of divine revelation, and as the point at which humanity is related to God. For if, as we have suggested, this inner spiritual side of man is not what it seems, but is simply made up of those judgements from which we are unable or unwilling to gain critical distance, then the consequence of the Liberal scheme would be that 'God' would function as the one who gives extra backing or legitimation to these ingrained, erroneous judgements.

Hence we can plausibly represent Barth's primary insight as follows: that which appears to us to be our inner spiritual self, by which we are apparently able to intuit truths directly and self-evidently, turns out in reality to be an aggregate of judgements which only seem to be self-evident because we are unable to acquire critical distance from them, and which are especially dangerous precisely because we are unable to acquire critical distance from them. Starting from this insight and from this principle, Barth believed he was duty bound to make an assault on the prevalent theological approach which linked God and his revelation with this supposed inner self, which turned God into a further legitimation for such erroneous, uncritical judgements, and which served to tie the knot of self-deception even tighter. And the specific problem with which Barth was faced was, how do we now speak of *God, given that the 'inner self', which was thought of as the primary line of access to him,* has been shown to be a minefield of error and self-deception?

As provisional evidence for this,⁵³ I would refer again to what was arguably the principal impetus in the formation of Barth's distinctive theology, namely his difficulty that many Germans claimed a pseudo-spiritual 'war experience', and that the Christians among them were able to claim their own 'war experience' as divinely approved, because of the established connection between the inner world of experience and divine revelation.

I am indebted to Bruce McCormack for tracing the relevant genetic-historical context of Barth's theological development. In particular, McCormack cites Barth's letter to W.Herrmann in which he writes:

⁵³ More detailed evidence for this will be drawn from Barth's earlier and later writings in my next and final chapter.

Especially with you...we learned to acknowledge 'experience' as the constitutive principle of knowing and doing in the domain of religion. In your school it became clear to us what it means to 'experience' God in Jesus. Now however, in answer to our doubts, an 'experience' which is completely new to us is held out to us by German Christians, an allegedly religious war 'experience'...⁵⁴

I think that McCormack is absolutely right when he comments: 'It is clear from the drift of Barth's questions that his primary difficulty at this point in time had to do with what he saw as a manipulation of religious experience to legitimate the most sinful and catastrophic of human actions.'⁵⁵ We should also observe how, many years later in 1925, Barth would criticise Herrmann's dependence on 'experience', saying that 'it [experience] cannot be isolated from the world in the way Herrmann wished...It is in the world and of the world'.⁵⁶ It is more than likely that this theological statement can be traced back to Barth's struggles associated with the outbreak of the First World War and Herrmann's support of the German war effort.

The question of revelation positivism

I think we will find it illuminating if we frame this question in terms of the perennial problem of theological or revelation positivism in Barth's thought.⁵⁷ This problem may be

⁵⁴ *Dialectical Theology*, p 113 - letter dated 4th Nov 1914 (citing from Karl Barth-Martin Rade: ein Briefwechsel, p 115).

⁵⁵ *Dialectical Theology*, p 113.

⁵⁶ 'The Principles of Dogmatics according to Wilhelm Herrmann' in Barth, *Theology and Church*, pp 259-60 (238-271) - (emphasis Barth's).

⁵⁷ As is well known, the term 'revelation positivism' (*Offenbarungspositivismus*) was used by Bonhoeffer in criticism of Barth (see especially *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, ³1971 (1953)), p 286). Simon Fisher has raised the question as to whether this is a coherent criticism of Barth given that various scholars have not reached a consensus as to exactly what Bonhoeffer meant by this criticism, and furthermore he states that it would be necessary to understand Bonhoeffer's criticism within the framework of his (Bonhoeffer's) own theological programme - which Fisher claims is by no means an easy undertaking given the fragmentary nature of his statements (Fisher, *Revelatory Positivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp 311f). I would therefore state that my use of the expression does not depend on a correct exegesis of Bonhoeffer but rather on the evident problem that Barth appears not to

summarised thus: Barth always appears to deny to us any genuine criteria for making a critical distinction between what is a genuine response to God's revelation and what is a merely human projection. Instead he asserts that it is only God in his freedom who determines when and where there has been a genuine response to his revelation. Barth asserts that there are no criteria accessible to our thought and experience which would enable us to distinguish between a genuine experience of God and a merely human projection. But then - and this is the problem of revelation positivism - Barth seems to be taking his stand on thin air, for (as I think Barth himself emphasised) we do not have any access to God's will or revelation apart from our thought or experience.

But what if Barth recognised that the very criteria by which we distinguish between what is really a response to God and what is a human projection are themselves culturally predetermined; that these 'criteria' are bound up with the machinations of a vast network of human power which, amongst other things, generates that particular kind of self-deception whereby we persuade ourselves of the unalterable necessity of this power network, and, moreover, represent this recognition as the product of experience and mature wisdom? Specifically, according to the Liberal scheme, we can recognise what is a real experience of God (as opposed to what is a mere remnant of irrational barbarism) by defining it in connection with our highest insights of morality and reason. But what if our highest insights of morality and reason are not what they seem to be? What if they conceal as much as they reveal of the truth about our culture, its development and relation to the rest of the world?

If this is Barth's position, and I believe we have good reason for thinking it was, then we can understand why he would wish to deny any direct connection between the apparently self-evident principles of culture or morality and God's revelation. Perhaps the classic expression of the Liberal perspective against which Barth is reacting comes from the pen of Harnack, in one of the 'fifteen questions' he addresses to the dialectical theologians: 'If God is definitely not all that is said of him in the development of culture and its

provide any means for grounding or progressively confirming Christian faith statements etc. To put my own approach in context, I would say that the background to my understanding of the matter is to be found in Pannenberg's analysis of Barth (in *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, p 29 - cf the opening section of my second chapter).

knowledge and morality, how is it possible to protect this culture and one's self in the long run against atheism?"⁵⁸ Barth's response to this question is telling:

The statements about God which are derived from "the development of culture and its knowledge and morality" (e.g. the statements of the war theologians of all lands) may have their significance and value as expressions of particular "religious experiences" (e.g. one's experiences during a war) alongside those of primitive peoples who do not as yet know such higher values. As the "preaching of the gospel" [referring back to a previous question] these statements in any case do not come into consideration, and whether they "protect" culture and the individual "from atheism" rather than, derived as they are from polytheism, plant atheism, may be in each case an open question... "True statements about God" can only be made at all where one knows he is placed not on some height of culture and religion, but before revelation and thereby under judgement...⁵⁹

Perhaps some of what Barth says here is obscure, but I think it sufficiently clear that his response does support the general picture of his theology presented so far, especially concerning its counter-cultural origins and direction. I will in fact be looking in my next and final chapter at more detailed evidence for this which will be drawn from his earliest and latest writings. However, for the present, I will draw this chapter to a close by giving a summary of how I understand Barth's approach to historical understanding. This will serve as a provisional summary of the findings of my fourth and fifth chapters.

Barth's approach to historical understanding; its relation to his 'christocentrism'

Barth's approach to historical understanding can be summarised as a re-evaluation of the meaning of critical distance in relation to the past. That is, what is normally experienced as critical distance towards the past, above all in the sense of having developed to a superior level over the past, is in reality a failure of critical distance in relation to the presuppositions or perspectives of the present.⁶⁰ I believe Barth was driven by an

⁵⁸ 'Fifteen Questions to Those Among the Theologians', p 166.

⁵⁹ 'Fifteen Answers to Professor von Harnack', p 168 (emphases Barth's). The last sentence is in fact in response to a subsequent question of Harnack's, but clearly is continuing in the same vein.

⁶⁰ cf The introductory comments on historical method in Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: 'Will it remain clear to us that at this moment [of our own theological present] that while the present can always be right over against the past, we can give no satisfactory answer to the question whether it is right

awareness of the deceptive element in the way we view past history, which is present even and especially when we believe we have attained to scholarly detachment, which is present even and especially when we attain to a more sophisticated analysis in terms of the need for an empathetic engagement with history. It was his awareness of this deceptive element which motivated him to contend for a critical distance between a 'general' or 'neutral' view of history and the Word of God.

We can also see how this relates to Barth's so-called christocentrism. It is necessary, at this point, to recall my arguments from earlier chapters concerning the soteriological thrust of Barth's christology, that is, concerning the fundamental significance of sin for his christology. As I have argued, Barth's main purpose was to take into account the problem of the hermeneutical dimension of sin in his presentation of the gospel of Christ. The problem is - what does it mean to proclaim salvation from sin in Christ, given that sin affects us most intensely at the level of self-evident awareness? Barth's arguments concerning the relation of Christ to world history can be understood as a resolve to take into account for Christian soteriology the self-deceptive element which inheres in our spontaneous or cultured awareness of history. For the modern requirement that the Christian gospel must accommodate itself to the claims of a general historical method, actually means that the gospel becomes accommodated to the sin of collective self-interest which is concealed within general historical method.

in actual fact? If that is forgotten, if in the intoxication of the moment the consciousness of being able to be right turns into the consciousness of actually being right, then our hearing of the voices of the past will be objectively wrong, however much it may be subjectively right. The one who is all too sure, illegitimately sure, that "we have brought it to so glorious a conclusion" cannot and may not notice carefully "what a wise man thought before us". When that happens, he is no longer responsible to him, but has clearly made him responsible to himself. That man now in some way stands before his throne of judgement...He is now no longer allowed to have his own say, but has to play a role corresponding with my point of view.' (pp 19-20.) It is also worth citing Barth's comment in the same work on the origin of the critical study of history: '[I]n that century [i.e. the eighteenth] began that highly problematic affair which we call 'critical study of history'. But what else can this mean but that it was in the eighteenth century that man began axiomatically to credit himself with being superior to the past, and assumed a standpoint in relation to it whence he found it possible to set himself up as judge over past events according to fixed principles, as well as to describe its deeds and to substantiate history's own report?' (p 58.)

Barth tells us, in a way representative of his entire theological approach, that world history must not be regarded as being or containing a second reality or principle alongside that of the reality of salvation in Jesus Christ.⁶¹ Now, this may appear to be a ‘christomonist’ account of world history, in which Barth asserts the presence and dominance of Christ everywhere, without needing to take into account the diversity of human experience or reality. And yet, I do not believe that Barth wished to assert his proclamation of Christ against the actual diversity of human experience; rather, as a more urgent concern, he wished to take into account the persistently self-deceptive element in human experience. The point is that we do not have an innocent or self-evident awareness of world-history; we have only our own perspective on world-history, which is constructed in a process of cultural and collective self-interest. This is why Barth believed that when general world-history is regarded as a second reality alongside the reality of salvation through Christ, when it is regarded as something which must be taken into account when we proclaim the gospel, then the gospel is accommodating itself to and associating itself with an alien principle. When Barth said that we need to believe in the victory and Lordship of Christ in the sphere of world-occurrence, then this was not the product of a Christ-centred enthusiasm, but a sober realisation that because of the self-deceptive and self-justifying element implicit in a general view of history, then the gospel is contradicting its own nature when it seeks to understand itself in the framework of a general history. For the gospel is meant to challenge human self-justification and is intended to announce God’s judgement and salvation in relation to it.

Now, the self-justifying character of contemporary culture, which inheres in its supposedly scientific view of history, takes the specific form of regarding one’s own time or culture as the locus of true progress or enlightenment (although, strictly, the concept of ‘progress’ is largely modern or even modern-European). But this means that one tends to regard the barbarisms of one’s own culture as ‘regrettable necessities’ whereas the barbarisms of

⁶¹ e.g. CD IV/3, p 687: ‘Even in relation to what takes place without, to the history of the cosmos as it is distinct but not separate from the history of the community of Jesus Christ, there can thus be no question of the real sway of any principle independent of the God who acts and is revealed in Jesus Christ, whether it be the autonomous rule of man, the overruling of fate or chance or of a freedom or necessity immanent in world-occurrence, or the control of any of the powers, forces or divinities which continually appear with their demands for fear, love, trust, and obedience.’

previous ages or of other cultures are regarded as barbarisms pure and simple. Thus, paradoxically but yet quite naturally, one combines a belief in the ‘Enlightenment’ of one’s own culture with a belief in the necessity of collaborating in its moral weaknesses or outright barbarisms.⁶² And so, when Barth states that there should not be a second principle alongside Christ in world history, what he essentially means is that the Christian gospel should not accommodate itself to this supposed ‘practical realism’ of the self-justifying discourse of one’s own culture.⁶³

In a sense, we have arrived again at the point at which I closed my third chapter. For there I was also concerned with the problem that a focus on the Enlightenment of one’s own culture may lead to an undue tolerance or even propagation of its characteristic barbarisms or injustices. In particular we were able to see this principle in the connection between the

⁶² cf a very early address of Barth’s, dated 1916: ‘The same happy gentleman of culture who today drives up so briskly in his little car of progress and so cheerfully displays the pennants of his various ideals, will tell you apprehensively tomorrow, if the matter comes up, that men are small and imperfect and that one may not indeed desire and expect too much from them...’ (‘The Righteousness of God’, p 17.) And in the same address we see further comments on the strange co-existence of a self-image of enlightened morality and the tolerance of very unmoral barbarisms: ‘Is it not our very morality which prevents our discerning that at a hundred other points we are the more firmly fettered to that [unrighteous, self-seeking, capricious, world-]will?’ (p 18); and finally Barth comments that the ‘righteousness of the state and the law’ is ‘[v]ery suitable for quieting the conscience’ and asks with reference to the war: ‘were it really possible for the state to make men out of wild animals, would the state find it necessary by a thousand arts to make wild animals out of men?’ (pp 18-19.) I will say more about the relation between Barth’s early work and the development of his later dogmatics in my concluding chapter.

⁶³ See CD IV/3, pp 702-3, where Barth is asserting the claim of the total supremacy of Christ over against a division into a twofold concept of ideal theory and practical realism. Barth asks ironically: ‘[D]oes not [the] mission and task [of the Christian community] in the world consist in saying precisely this [twofold concept] to the world, and thus in singing again, and if possible commending, the old song of the tension or dialectic of the two principles or kingdoms and of the attitude to be desired on the part of man, the main accent being sometimes placed on the theological equivalent of an ideal and theoretical outlook, and sometimes on the theological equivalent of a realistic and practical? As if all the birds in their different ways were not voicing the same song from every roof!...Does [the Christian community] really think and say no more than that there is a higher and a lower, a theoretical and practical truth, that it is better in world history if men resolve and act accordingly, but that it is unavoidable and quite imperative that we should not lose sight of the other aspect, that we should take it very seriously, and that in this respect we should diligently avail ourselves of the wise counsel of our so-called statesmen and political experts?’

uncritical assertion of the values of Western democracy and the atrocities of the Vietnam War. There also we were concerned with the problem of the profoundly deceptive element which inheres in cultural self-awareness. And yet, I closed this chapter with the comment that, although this consideration may show the practical and political potential of the theological principles found in Christ and Adam, nevertheless this does not absolve us from the problem of considering the viability of Barth's exegesis, specifically as an interpretation of the biblical text.

In the subsequent chapters, I have not in fact considered whether the exegesis found in Christ and Adam actually corresponds with the meaning of Romans 5. As I said in my introduction, there can be no question of denying that Barth does frequently impose prior theological principles on the biblical text; and Christ and Adam is certainly no exception to this. The question can only be why he does this, and, above all for the purpose of this thesis, the question is what this implies for the objectivity of his interpretation.

The basic idea I have sought to develop in my fourth and fifth chapters which have dealt specifically with Barth's hermeneutics and his relation to biblical criticism (especially that represented by Bultmann) is that the principle of collective self-deception affects not only contemporary judgements but also has a profound effect on our perception of past history. When we believe we have an 'objective' view of past history, then we are in fact reading into history the prejudices of contemporary culture, and therefore anything we may supposedly learn from the tradition or authority of the past simply becomes a reflection and further reinforcement of those prejudices. The consequence of this is that in our approach to history we cannot rely on what is normally understood as objective description. For in reality this would entail not the suspension of present prejudices but rather their concealment. Accordingly, in Barth's view, we cannot depend on objective description in our exegesis of past texts. We must incorporate our counter-cultural protest in the exegetical process itself. We must not allow that there is a past-in-itself which exists in abstraction from our cultural interests and corresponding responsibilities.

At the opening of this chapter, I asked the question whether our comparison between Barth and Gadamer would have fundamental significance for understanding Barth's theology, or

whether Barth's christological concentration necessitates a fundamental reservation and limit on any comparison between Barth and any secular philosopher. I hope it has become clear from what I have written that, in my view, this comparison does indeed have fundamental significance for understanding Barth's theology. However, I will not recapitulate or summarise my arguments for this here, as I think that this will be adequately addressed in the summary of my thesis as a whole, to which I now turn.

Chapter Six

Conclusion and Synthesis

General Summary

In the course of this thesis, in response to the problem of Barth's unnatural and seemingly subjectivist exegesis, I have been occupied with identifying what I believe to be the philosophical or hermeneutical principle underlying his theology and exegesis. And I have argued that this principle is fundamentally anti-Cartesian. It is an attack on the epistemological norm of the generally or universally evident. In particular, I suggested that the concept of the 'generally or universally evident', which is in turn based on the ideal of a universal subject, may contain a persistently self-deceptive character. I suggested that this was Barth's basic reason for refusing to ground the specific claims of theology on the principle of what is generally evident.

I compared Barth's approach here to Niebuhr's principle of collective self-deception, according to which moral principles, which appear to have general or universal validity, can actually be motivated by collective self-interest. However, I suggested that Niebuhr's thought was less hermeneutically sensitive than that of Barth, for Niebuhr still wished to ground his thinking on general moral principles observable in human nature. Barth, on the contrary, remained alert to the problem that all general moral principles, however seemingly self-evident, are vulnerable to the problem of collective self-deception. We saw the practical import of this question vividly illustrated in the disagreement between Barth and Niebuhr on the issue of anti-communism, and how Barth's approach was arguably vindicated by the tragic events of the Vietnam War.

In my fourth and fifth chapters I proceeded to elaborate on the thesis of Richard Burnett, namely that Barth's approach to historical criticism can be understood in terms of a fundamental critique of the then prevalent empathetic tradition. I further argued, especially in my fifth chapter, that there was a positive parallel between Barth and H.-G. Gadamer. Gadamer also made fundamental criticisms of the empathetic tradition, as

represented especially by Schleiermacher and Dilthey, and I believe that we have developed constructive and fruitful parallels between Barth and Gadamer in this respect.

What I would like to do now is to look more closely at the relationship between the different parts of my thesis, in order to bring out the inner coherence of the ideas presented therein. I will begin with an examination of the relationship and similarity between ‘Cartesianism’, analysed mainly in my second and third chapters, and the empathetic tradition, analysed in my fourth and fifth chapters.

The similarity between Cartesianism and the empathetic tradition

It will already have become in some part evident that I have understood Barth’s opposition to the empathetic tradition in the framework of his anti-Cartesianism. If correct, this would show consistency in the development of my theory about Barth’s basic hermeneutical principle, for his opposition to the empathetic tradition would then be shown to be fundamentally related to his anti-Cartesian stance. Now, Gadamer certainly understood the empathetic tradition to represent a residual Cartesianism, and himself set his criticism of this tradition in an anti-Cartesian framework.¹ However, it may be objected that the empathetic tradition was itself founded on anti-Cartesian principles. Hence we must now ask the question whether we can adequately understand Gadamer or Barth’s opposition to the empathetic tradition as an outworking of an anti-Cartesian foundation.

For do not Schleiermacher and Dilthey base their idea of knowledge on engagement and involvement, in stark contrast to the cool detachment of Descartes’ isolated individual? For instead of a dispassionate detachment, Schleiermacher and Dilthey base their epistemology on involvement with life and on personal, inward feeling. The very concept of empathy means that the object of knowledge in history becomes accessible through re-living the historical reality in one’s own experience; hence one understands history by being inwardly moved rather than through any methodical detachment.

¹ See especially *Truth and Method*, pp 237f.

However, I have followed Burnett and also Gadamer in holding that the empathetic approach, far from being an effective criticism of Cartesian detachment, actually represents a consolidation of it. In particular, the emphasis on the inner, subjective continuity between past history and present understanding of history simply underlines the discontinuity (and hence detachment) which exists on the level of objective understanding. As we have seen, that which is uncongenial to present cultural understanding - or prejudices - is taken to be an 'external objectification' of the inner, spiritual (subjective) aspect of the past, and this inner, spiritual aspect of the past happens also to correspond to the inner being of the present. Thus, we in the present may even congratulate ourselves on having understood the past in a deeper sense, on having distinguished between the primary and secondary, between the inner, spiritual aspects of the past and their external expressions; and yet we have attained nothing other than the imposition of our own prejudices on the past. At the root of this is the self-evident assumption of the superiority of present culture over the past, in that the past cannot compete with the present; and in connection with this last point I argued that Barth's opposition to the empathetic tradition is accordingly linked directly to his counter-cultural criticism. The significance of this will appear more clearly later in this chapter.

Fundamentally, what the Cartesian and the empathetic traditions hold in common is this: they fail to recognise that the spontaneous self-awareness of the individual is predetermined and relativised by historical and social factors.² It is certainly true that Dilthey's aim was to overcome Descartes (and others) by grounding the self-awareness of the individual in life relations rather than in isolated reflection. This was intended to rescue the individual consciousness from a rationalist distortion which took no account of the living context of the individual.³ And yet, as I shall now seek to explain in terms of Gadamer's critique, Dilthey's concept of the self-awareness of the individual was still tied to the Cartesian perspective at the deepest level.

² So Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp 239-40, where Cartesian method and Romantic hermeneutics are said to be comparable in that they take 'no account whatsoever of the historical nature of experience'.

³ See especially Dilthey, *Selected Writings*, p 162, which provides a powerful summary of Dilthey's overall programme in this regard, although Descartes is not specifically mentioned at this point.

Gadamer's fundamental criticism of Dilthey concerned his belief that the interpreter in the present is able to understand a past historical figure or author because the interpreter and the author are both historical beings. Dilthey relied on the supposed fact that the one who is seeking to understand history is also the one who makes history. And so it is this homogeneity of historian and historical personage/author which makes understanding of history possible. Gadamer's criticism of this principle is that on a fundamental level it fails to recognise the true nature of the involvement of the contemporary interpreter in history. Dilthey assumes that because the interpreter is personally involved in history, then he has a kind of innate awareness of history. And yet, in Gadamer's understanding, this personal involvement in history entails not only (and perhaps not even mainly) an awareness of history; rather, it involves what we may call an entanglement with history, and to that extent this awareness is predetermined (and hence limited) by history. Because of this, the involvement of the interpreter in history does not reveal but at least partially conceals the true nature of past history from him. Dilthey's position, on the contrary, retains the Cartesian illusion of an essential detachment of the individual from history, and a corresponding a-historical vantage point over history.⁴

The objection of Thiselton: Dilthey's devaluation of introspection

Now, A.C. Thiselton objects to this criticism of Dilthey by Gadamer, claiming that Dilthey himself denied that there was any such detachment of individual self-awareness from history. In particular, Dilthey claimed that the self cannot know itself in isolation, but in order to know itself must go out of itself and make a 'detour' through the broader social and historical environment of texts and institutions. In particular, Thiselton cites Dilthey's programmatic statement: 'Not through introspection but only through history do we come to know ourselves.'⁵

Now, it is certainly true that Dilthey mistrusted the results of immediate introspection, for the simple reason that such results were not subject to scientific control. In order to

⁴ See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp 222f.

⁵ Thiselton, *Interpreting God and the Postmodern Self*, p 61; Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften VII: Der Aufbau der geschichtlichen Welt in den Geisteswissenschaften*, p 279: 'Der Mensch erkennt sich nur in der Geschichte, nie durch Introspektion.'

recognise the full complexity and subtlety of Dilthey's position, we should recognise that he does not give absolute precedence to the individual's immediate experience of his own inner life, as a vantage point from which all other things and all other selves may be known. Rather, we should recognise that Dilthey aimed at a balance between the immediacy of 'life' experienced by the individual and the generalising claims of scientific control or objectivity.⁶ Hence instead of introspection he emphasised the 'fixed' expressions of life (fixierte Lebensäußerungen) such as writing, institutions or law, which can be returned to again and again for observation, and hence in a relative way are subject to scientific control.⁷ I think the crucial point here is that Dilthey was concerned not with isolated individuals but rather with the common inner life (i.e. 'common human nature') in which a multiplicity of individuals participate. This common inner life of humanity needs external expressions or external objectifications to attain its commonality; for apart from language fixed in writing or broader social and historical structures, each individual would simply be isolated and there would be no communion between individuals across time and space. In the final analysis, our awareness of the inner life of others, and even

⁶ 'Human studies have indeed the advantage over the natural sciences that their object is not sensory appearance as such, no mere reflection of reality within consciousness, but is rather first and foremost an inner reality, a coherence experienced from within. Yet the very way in which this reality is experienced within us raises the gravest *difficulties as to its objective apprehension*...[A]ny inner experiencing, through which I become aware of my own disposition, can never by itself bring me to a consciousness of my own individuality. I experience the latter only through a comparison of myself with other people; at that point alone do I become aware of what distinguishes me from others...[O]ur insight into the extent, nature and limits of our powers remain[s] at best incomplete.' Dilthey then proceeds to redress the balance by emphasising the importance of one's own life or experience for knowledge: 'But the existence of other people is given us only from the outside, in sensory events, gestures, words and actions. Only through a process of reconstruction [Nachbildung] do we complete this sense perception, which initially takes the form of isolated signs. We are thus obliged to translate everything...out of our own sense of life.' (Dilthey, 'The Rise of Hermeneutics', p 231 (emphasis mine).)

⁷ e.g. 'Even the most attentive concentration [on another's inner life] can develop into an orderly and systematic procedure - one by which a measurable degree of objectivity can be reached - only where the expression of life has been fixed, so that we can return to it again and again.' (Dilthey, 'The Rise of Hermeneutics', p 232.)

our awareness of our own inner life, will degenerate into sheer subjectivism and arbitrariness if it is not mediated through these externally fixed expressions and institutions.⁸

I still think, however, that Gadamer's point is well made, in spite of the fact that Dilthey does seem to take into account the vital rôle of social and historical structures in the process of self-understanding. For it seems to me that, in Dilthey's scheme, the inward life which inheres in individuals remains basically in control of the external structures which it generates. These external structures effectively serve individual life by allowing it to transcend the narrowness of isolation, and by allowing a shared inner life or common human nature to unfold; yet we can see that according to this scheme these 'external objectifications' are always in the service of the inner life and hence will never dominate or overwhelm it. I think Gadamer's point is that the external structures of society and history, even though they may be set up or created by an aggregate of individuals, still in practice transcend all specific individuals and are therefore far more powerful and determinative factors in the makeup of individual consciousness than Dilthey allowed. Hence I believe that the comparison between Dilthey and Cartesianism still holds, namely that Dilthey does not take appropriate account of the impact of the social and historical context on individual consciousness.⁹ This, in the end, is why Cartesian thought and

⁸ Dilthey expresses this vividly in his concept of 'objective mind' (objektiver Geist), e.g.: 'By this [objective mind] I mean the manifold forms in which what individuals hold in common have objectified themselves in the world of the senses. In this objective mind the past is a permanently enduring present for us. Its realm extends from the style of life and the forms of social intercourse to the system of purposes which society has created for itself and to custom, law, state, religion, art, science and philosophy. For even the work of genius represents ideas, feelings and ideals commonly held in an age and environment. From this world of objective mind the self receives sustenance from earliest childhood...The child grows up within the order and customs of the family which it shares with other members and its mother's orders are accepted in this context. Before it learns to talk it is already wholly immersed in that common medium.' (Selected Writings, p 221; cf pp 191f.)

⁹ The crucial passage of Gadamer, which Thiselton criticises, runs as follows: 'Since he [Dilthey] started from the awareness of "experiences" (Erlebnisse), he was unable to build a bridge to the historical realities, because the great historical realities of society and state always have a predeterminate influence on any "experience". Self-reflection and autobiography - Dilthey's starting point - are not primary and are therefore not an adequate basis for the hermeneutical problem, because through them history is made private once more. In fact history does not belong to us; we belong to it. Long before we understand

Dilthey share a similar a-historical concept of a universal, common human nature which transcends all historical and social difference - or, what amounts to the same thing, they share an ideal of objectivity which presupposes an inward detachment, transcending all local social and historical differences.¹⁰

We will return below to the implications of this for understanding Barth; for although Barth was not specifically interested in Dilthey, nevertheless I believe that these issues between Dilthey and Gadamer provide an important clue for understanding Barth's relationship to Liberal theology. But for now I will return to the general plan of integrating the different parts of my thesis; in particular, I will seek to demonstrate the relation between my treatment of R.Niebuhr in my second and third chapters, and my treatment of H.-G.Gadamer in my fourth and fifth chapters.

The combination of Gadamer and Niebuhr as a point of contact with Barth

As mentioned above, I have made use in this thesis of a certain parallel between Barth and Niebuhr; however, I have also argued that the parallel is limited because Barth showed a more profound awareness of the hermeneutical dimension of the problem than we find in

ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way through the family, society and state in which we live.' (Truth and Method, p 276.) Certainly, when we compare this passage with Dilthey's words quoted in the last footnote, we will note close similarities between the two writers' view of the social and historical context of human subjectivity; because of this, we may well wonder how fundamental the difference between Dilthey and Gadamer really is. I would claim that the difference, indeed opposition, is that for Dilthey the public realities of history and society are secondary (i.e. determined) and the inner/private life is primary (i.e. determinative), whereas for Gadamer the public realities of history and society are primary (i.e. determinative) and the inner life is secondary (i.e. determined). The concrete significance of this will appear more clearly below.

¹⁰ The close connection between Cartesian objectivism and Dilthey's view of historical understanding forms a central part of Gadamer's criticism of Dilthey. Gadamer clearly believed that Dilthey was ultimately tied to the abstracting, generalising method of the natural sciences, in spite of his (Dilthey's) attempt to disentangle himself from it (Truth and Method, pp 234f). Thiselton notes this issue in connection with Dilthey's belief in a universal human nature (Interpreting God, p 60). However, given that Thiselton praises Dilthey's concern with trans-individual social and historical realities (texts and institutions), we should note that it is precisely on this point where Dilthey's thinking is closely bound up with his view of a universal or common human nature (see Interpreting God, pp 61-2).

Niebuhr. I have found that drawing parallels between Barth and Gadamer has been helpful for elucidating this last point. And yet, on the other hand, I find that Niebuhr's concepts of collective self-deception and collective self-interest give us a focus for working out the consequences of Gadamer's position - a focus which does not receive as much emphasis in the thought of Gadamer himself. I believe that there is a natural confluence between the position of Gadamer (that our subjectivity or self-awareness is determined by factors of which we have no immediate awareness) and Niebuhr's concept of corporate self-deception. For corporate self-deception expresses very nicely the consequences of the situation that the self-understanding of the individual is predetermined by the historical and social factors which are concealed within (and therefore from) that self-understanding. Thus, from my point of view, Gadamer and Niebuhr may be regarded as mutually corroborating and mutually complementary.

However, the most significant consequence of this for my purposes is the point of contact it affords for understanding Barth's own thought. To repeat my previous conclusions: the combination of Gadamer and Niebuhr's insights which I have sketched suggests what may be termed a recognition of the hermeneutical dimension of sin. That is, the self-awareness of the individual is distorted by the structures of collective self-deception which precede and pre-form it. As I have argued at length, Barth's theology was grounded on the question: what does it mean to say that Christ saves us from our sin, when we take into account this hermeneutical dimension of sin? Barth's opposition to the 'generally valid' can also be understood from this starting point, for the limited self-awareness of the individual, circumscribed as it is by collective sin, asserts itself through claiming a general validity, affirming that its individuality is an instance of a general or universally valid human nature - which, we have seen, occurs in both Cartesianism proper and in the seemingly anti-Cartesian position of the empathetic tradition.¹¹

¹¹ In this connection, we can take note of Barth's comments on ideology in *The Christian Life*, pp 224-5, worth quoting here at length in that they show how Barth understands human sin specifically as the tendency of man to view his own immediate perceptions as having universal validity and relevance: 'Man has the remarkable ability to grasp in the form of concepts his conscious perceptions of his own inner life, that of his fellow men, and finally that of the whole of the outside world. He can put these together in definite pictures...[etc.]...So far, so good. But supposing that it is the man who has fallen from God who makes use of this wonderful ability, this power of spirit! In this spirit of his, which makes itself independent of the living Spirit of God, there will then arise at once, and at the decisive point, a distinctive

This explains why, according to Barth's view, it is impossible to have true knowledge of self or the world apart from the revelation of Christ.¹² This is (as I argued at length in my second and third chapters) because the self-knowledge of humanity is distorted through sin, and requires the salvation from sin which is announced in Christ in order to know itself. This is also, in my view, why Barth refuses to analyse or ground the truth of the Christian gospel in terms of a general framework of religion.¹³ This, according to my understanding, is because (according to Barth) truths which appear to have general validity are also vulnerable to profound distortion.

Hence I would argue that we can make sense of Barth's apparent restriction to a particular theological principle when we understand this restriction as a determination to work out

numbness, hardening, and rigidity...This comes about as he thinks he can and should ascribe to the presuppositions and sketches he has achieved by this remarkable ability, not just a provisional and transitory but a permanent normativity, not just one that is relative but one that is absolute...He already measures and evaluates others only from the standpoint of whether they are supporters of this ideology, or whether they might become such...Its glory has already become for him the solution not only to the personal problem of his own life but to each and all of the problems of the world.' (emphasis mine.)

¹² e.g. CD IV/3, p 771: 'To know men is to see and understand that, as surely as Jesus Christ died and rose again for all, the grace of God has reference and is promised and addressed to all. To know men, to be aware of them, in this critical and comprehensive way is to know the world as it is. For the world as seen in all its distinctions, antitheses, and inner contradictions and yet as seen in relation to Jesus Christ and therefore originally and definitely with God, is the world as it really is. The world as seen and understood in any other way is not the world as it is; it is a mere picture of the world projected idealistically, positivistically, or existentially, scientifically or mythologically, with or without a moral purpose, pessimistically or lightheartedly, yet always with an unhealthy naivety and one-sidedness. The world thinks that it knows itself when it draws and contemplates a book of such pictures, whereas in truth, or rather in the most radical untruth, it misses its own reality and is simply groping about in the dark as it turns these various pages....'; cf also CD IV/3, p 803.

¹³ e.g. CD IV/3, p 727: 'It is for this reason that disastrous misunderstanding necessarily results when interpretations are attempted which assume that [the Christian community] is to be reduced to a common denominator [as "Christianity"] with such analogous phenomena as Islam or Buddhism or even Communism, and considered together, and perhaps conceived in historico-critical terms, probably under the master conception of religion, as either a link in historical development or the particular actualisation of a general possibility.'

the consequences for theology of a specifically philosophical or hermeneutical principle. Barth's attempt to work out his entire theology on the basis of God's revelation in Christ is grounded in and predetermined by this philosophical or hermeneutical principle. His theology is grounded in a recognition that the self-understanding of the world and humanity is distorted by sinful self-interest; his purpose is radically and fundamentally to restate the gospel in view of this specifically 'hermeneutical' aspect of this self-interest.

I think that possibly the most fundamentally illuminating way of understanding Barth's theology would be to say that it is driven by the need to avoid compromise - that is, to avoid compromise of the gospel with the world and with worldly values. And yet, I do not believe that Barth has any independent or autonomous interest in avoiding such compromise for its own sake, as if he were zealously concerned for the purity of the gospel as such. On the contrary, the real reason why he seeks to avoid compromise with general concepts based on natural human self-awareness is that he recognises that these general concepts are intrinsically determined by the negative and deceptive forces of human history. Human history as such represents a compromise of positive moral principles with evil. This is, I believe, directly equivalent to our previous observations concerning how human Enlightenment always entails severe compromises with 'regrettable necessities' - the latter being in reality the characteristic injustices and barbarisms of our own culture.¹⁴ And yet, these compromises are not made consciously,

¹⁴ cf Barth's early address 'The Righteousness of God' (1916) in which he writes: 'We have before us the fiendishness of business competition and the world war, passion and wrongdoing, antagonism between classes and moral depravity within them, economic tyranny above and the slave spirit below. We may indeed argue about these things and prove to ourselves and others quite shrewdly that they all have their necessary reasons. We may imagine ourselves thus becoming inwardly free from them. But we do not escape the simple fact that we suffer from them. The unjust will which imbues and rules our life makes of it, with or without our sanction, a weltering inferno... We may temporarily deceive ourselves about [this unjust will]. We may temporarily come to an understanding with it. Obviously it will never do so with us... But many times the fearful apprehension seizes us that unrighteousness may triumph in the end... And the impossible resolve suggests itself - make peace with it! Surrender yourself to the thought that the world is hell, and conform! There seems nothing else to do.' (p 12.)

but actually precede and distort our capacity for perception and understanding at the deepest level.¹⁵

I have suggested repeatedly that the reason why Barth claimed that human nature and sin itself can only be known through Christ is that our awareness of our nature and of sin are themselves distorted by sin - and hence we need redemption from sin in order to arrive at such self-knowledge.¹⁶ And yet, this should not be understood to mean that the Christian has attained to (or has been granted) a state in which he or she has been redeemed from sin, and hence now has true knowledge of self, sin and the world. This would be to eliminate the eschatological element - that is, the extent to which the Christian has not yet been redeemed from sin. I do not think Barth ever underestimates this factor.¹⁷ His point is that Christians ought to recognise that Christ has in principle conquered the evil forces in the world as such, even though this is subject to an important eschatological reservation, namely that the full revelation of this victory has yet to appear. However, Christians often behave as if Christ were not victor in the world as such, and thus arrange various compromises (or 'syntheses') with it, between the 'ideal' of their faith or God's saving act and the 'real' or human world around them.¹⁸

¹⁵ We can see Barth's idea of the structure of compromise being concealed within human awareness in an illuminating passage found in CD IV/3. Here Barth is making use of the opposing concepts of the good creation of God on the one hand and of the negativity of 'nothingness' on the other. The point is that man seeks to bring these together in a dialectical synthesis where they ought to be regarded as antithetical: 'They [human beings] count upon both [principles] where, with appropriate seriousness, and to the exclusion of the other, they ought to count only upon the one, and therefore, with a consistency appropriate to a mere intruder, not to count upon the other. Hence it is not the glorious or shameful acts, but their compromises, which give to their history its distinctive aspect from the human standpoint. Their eye is *shifty...It squints as a good eye neither would nor could.*' (CD IV/3, p 696 - my emphasis.)

¹⁶ e.g. CD IV/2, p 379: 'As the one who commits sin man is himself totally and radically compromised. Where this is a true knowledge of sin, it can only be as an element in the knowledge of God, of revelation, and therefore of faith, for which he cannot in any way prepare himself. Man is corrupt even in his self-understanding, even in the knowledge of his corruption.'

¹⁷ e.g. CD IV/3, pp 917f.

¹⁸ In my fifth chapter I drew attention to a section of CD IV/3, in which Barth writes of the compromise between the two principles of the 'theological equivalent of an ideal and theoretical outlook' and the 'theological equivalent of a realistic and practical' (CD IV/3, p 702). In the following pages, Barth

Evidence from Barth's early thought

I believe that we can see the seeds of Barth's mature position in many of his earlier writings and addresses. In particular, I believe that we can find the fundamental ideas of Barth's theology, from which he did not stray but which he simply worked out in detail in his Dogmatics, in his early essays and reflections on the figures of Friedrich Naumann, Christoph Blumhardt (the 'younger' Blumhardt) and Paul Althaus.¹⁹ A brief review of these reflections will enable us to relate his theology more closely to the question of the relation and distinction between the subjective and objective poles which we were considering earlier in this chapter and, indeed, have been considering throughout this thesis.

What these early essays show, for me, is the political and counter-cultural origins of Barth's suspicion of the frequently made distinction between the inner/spiritual on the one hand and the outer/worldly on the other. This corresponds exactly to the distinction between the 'ideal' of Christian faith and the 'real' conditions of the 'outside' world which I mentioned previously; as we shall see, it corresponds also to the distinction

continues to write vividly of this compromise, e.g. p 705: 'In the search for a superior principle transcending and dissolving the antithesis of God and man in world-occurrence, the Christian community would then have found a place above the antithesis, and therefore a synthesis and reconciliation, in which human confusion, which has itself originated in such a synthesis, would be supremely established and affirmed and therefore definitively justified and sanctified. Christ Himself would then have been brought into agreement or harmony with Belial (2 Cor 6¹⁵).' (Note the words 'which has itself originated in such a synthesis' - this means that Barth regards the compromise of the gospel with the world as a continuation of the compromise which goes on within the world itself quite apart from the church - i.e. the compromise he designates as 'human confusion'.) See further on the compromise between the Church and the world, in *The Christian Life*, p 147, where Barth talks about 'the possibility of a concordat between the ignorance and knowledge of God in the human life of the Christian as such. If there were such a concordat, this would mean that he would have to respect two principles and norms, that he would have to exist in two spheres, that he would have to serve two masters, a greater and a smaller, perhaps, or a primary and secondary, or even, perhaps, an inner and an outer...' (emphasis mine; the significance of the antithesis of 'inner and outer' will become further apparent below).

¹⁹ 'Past and Future: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 35-45; 'Basic Problems of Christian Social Ethics: A Discussion with Paul Althaus' in *The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology*, pp 46-57.

between subjective and objective. Essential to Barth's thought is his passionate concern about the structure of deceptive compromise which underlies all such distinctions. His point seems to be that when we acknowledge an 'outer' or 'real' world to which the claims of the Christian faith are only indirectly applicable, then we are in fact arranging an illegitimate compromise with the realities of the outer world when we ought to be protesting against them.

In the early Barth, we find the view that a retreat to an inner world of conscience means not a deeper Christian spirituality allied with mature realism about the 'way of the world'; rather, it means a deceptive justification of the way of the world with its hardened political structures which are placed beyond effective criticism by this very division of inner (spiritual) and outer (worldly). Of the later Friedrich Naumann Barth critically writes: 'Naumann was back where he had started - with the God who acts inscrutably, with the religion of the soul which may seek comfort and power in the world, but does not seek victory over the world.'²⁰ By contrast, Blumhardt (who clearly influenced Barth profoundly) clung to a

hope for a visible and tangible appearing of the lordship of God over the world (in contrast to the simple, and so often blasphemous, talking about God's omnipotence); hope for radical help and deliverance from the former state of the world (in opposition to that soothing and appeasing attitude which must everywhere come to a halt before unalterable 'relationships'); hope for all, for mankind (in contrast to the selfish concern for one's own salvation [das eigene Seelenheil] and to all the attempts to raise up religious supermen and aristocrats); hope for the physical side of life as well as for the spiritual, in the sense that not only sin and sorrow, but also poverty, sickness and death shall one day be abolished (in contrast to a purely spiritual ideal of the so-called 'religious-moral' life).²¹

²⁰ 'Past and Future: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt', p 39.

²¹ 'Past and Future: Friedrich Naumann and Christoph Blumhardt', pp 41-2. In addition to Blumhardt, we can also see here the influence of the religious socialist author Hermann Kutter, who wrote: 'We can understand "conservative" Christianity when it defends a system that has accomplished so much. But that it [Christianity] will not recognize the world-renewing power of the spirit that has animated it, that it distinguishes so anxiously between inner and outer, here is painful proof of its poverty and its godlessness...The same God who works in the inmost hearts of men, shall He not also change the outward aspect of man's life? He who dries up the root of sin in the heart...shall He not also use His power where sin flourishes...in the industrial world?' (They Must: or God and the Social Democracy (Chicago: Co-operative Printing Company, 1908), p 78 - emphasis mine.) 'You speak of the "inner" life because you are

In this we see the basic framework of Barth's suspicion of the distinction between inner and outer; the retreat to an inner world essentially means that the outer world remains unchanged, that we are forced to halt before 'unalterable relationships'. This pattern can be seen even more clearly in Barth's response to Althaus. Barth notes how Althaus advocates a direct relation to God and to the gospel through the inner self or 'spirit', but is rather more 'realistic' or rather pessimistic about applying God's revealed will to the external realities of political life. In response, Barth asks:

[W]here does Althaus, who is so sober in relation to the political realization of the will of God, get the certainty with which he asserts its psychological realization? Surely it is not the case that the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' commandment to love are things that are possible, attainable, and feasible spiritually [seelisch] but not politically and socially? There is surely no difference: The inner life, even the religious, even the Christian religious life, stands under the same judgement under which Althaus (and we agree with him) sees the outward life...²²

Barth sums up as follows:

*I confess that [Althaus'] book has greatly strengthened my deep mistrust of the sinister connection between Lutheran inwardness and Lutheran worldliness.*²³

Now, it is surely impossible to miss here a connection with Barth's criticism of Herrmann and his theological reliance on experience and the inner life (discussed in my fifth chapter). And what I find most striking is that we find a close connection between Barth's criticism of the writers Naumann and Althaus, and our general analysis of the problem of the focus on subjectivity found in the empathetic tradition. For there we saw that the emphasis on inwardness and subjectivity means in effect that the objective or external receives an indirect legitimation. As I argued at length in my last chapter, the point is that a reliance on inward experience (or aesthetic categories) means in effect that the external

in darkness, and your own "inner life" is darkness. You have no power to transform the external world...because you do not know the living God.' (They must, p 81.) (cf Barth, 'The Church between East and West', p 134.)

²² 'Basic Problems of Christian Social Ethics', p 55 (last emphasis mine).

²³ 'Basic Problems of Christian Social Ethics', p 56 (emphasis mine).

presuppositions of our culture are placed beyond criticism. These presuppositions may be ‘only’ external, but they are the presuppositions which create and sustain the social order in which we live, and to that extent a retreat to the inward, subjective sphere is irresponsible. The institutions which grant us our freedom and restrict that of others may be relatively devalued as ‘external objectifications’ of the true, inward life, but from Barth’s point of view they are also thereby sanctified, recognised as only a relative evil and not as the radical evil which they really are. I believe we can see Barth applying precisely this pattern of criticism to Althaus and Naumann, when he sees a connection between their retreat to an inner world and a compromise with and justification of the external forces of history and culture.

It is very striking that we can trace Barth’s attention to this distinction between inner and outer to the period even before the outbreak of the First World War; indeed, we find it as far back as October 1911, in Barth’s first and most famous address to the local Safenwil Arbeiterverein, just three months after the beginning of his pastorate.²⁴ McCormack observes that in this address Barth implicitly criticises Harnack’s teaching (expressed in his book *What is Christianity?*), namely that the gospel is simply a matter of the soul and could be related to individual acts of charity but could not in any direct sense be externalised in terms of change to the social or economic order.²⁵ McCormack also cites the following from one of Barth’s sermons of 1913:

²⁴ ‘Jesus Christ and the Movement for Social Justice’, in G. Hunsinger (ed.), *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, pp 19-45.

²⁵ McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 89f; Harnack, *What is Christianity?* (Oxford: Williams and Norgate, ²1957 (1901)), p 116 (‘The Gospel is above all questions of mundane development; it is concerned not with material things but with the souls of men.’); p 101 (‘The Gospel is a social message, solemn and overpowering in its force; it is the proclamation of solidarity and brotherliness, in favour of the poor. But the message is bound up with the recognition of the infinite value of the human soul, and is contained in what Jesus said about the kingdom of God. We may also assert that it is an essential part of what he there said. But laws or ordinances or injunctions bidding us forcibly alter the conditions of the age in which we may happen to be living are not to be found in the gospel.’) In all fairness we must recognise the complexity of Harnack’s position, for he did not claim that the gospel could not in any way be related to socialist struggle; he merely claimed that this could not be a part of the essence of the gospel. However, we should note that J.C. O’Neill, in a recent article, argues for an integral connection between Harnack’s

It is not only 'we', that is to say, our souls, our inner and personal life which must become light. Rather, the world must become light; everything around us must become light. We must not separate the two from one another. Unbelief is hidden in this separation...You may not say and think, I do want the light to apply to me personally and will strive to be subject to the will of God even in the small things. But what does it matter to me whether self-interest and stupidity and animal instinct rule outside, in the world of commerce in public morality, in politics great and small? Let it be so! so long as I save my soul in this evil world.²⁶

I mention this because in my previous chapters I have drawn attention to Barth's struggle with Herrmann, specifically with regard to the rôle of 'inward experience' as a justification of the war. However, in the light of the evidence just cited, I certainly would not say that Barth's suspicion of the 'inner life' originates from his disillusionment with Herrmann with regard to the war; but I would still say that he relates this prior framework to his struggle with Herrmann.²⁷ This was only natural given Herrmann's emphasis on religious experience and the 'inner life'. Indeed, it is particularly striking that this basic

spiritual/private view of religion and his rôle in the outbreak of the First World War. ('Adolf von Harnack and the entry of the German state into war, July-August 1914', pp 15f.)

²⁶ *Dialectical Theology*, p 96 (Barth, *Predigten* 1913 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1976), pp 71-2). Perhaps even more striking is another sermon of 1913 to which McCormack refers, namely that on the cleansing of the temple. McCormack emphasises the fact that Barth draws attention to Jesus' anger as evidence for Barth's conflict with the world around him; yet McCormack does not note Barth's usage in the same sermon of the duality between inner and outer: 'Nun etwas Weiteres: Das scheinbar Äußerliche an jener Handlung Jesu im Tempel. Ja, das Übel, das er dort antraf und das ihn so zornig machte, war etwas Äußerliches, und mit einem äußerlichen Mittel, nämlich mit einer Geißel aus Stricken, hat er es bekämpft.' (*Predigten* 1913, p 34.) 'Wir Christen von heutzutage sollten noch viel mehr lernen, abzukommen von dem halb ängstlichen, halb bequemen Gedanken, das Christentum sei bloß eine Gemüts- und Seelensache und nicht auch die Macht, die das äußere Leben, die "Welt" wie wir sagen, umgestalten muß.' (p 36.)

²⁷ cf Barth's question to Herrmann in his letter of 4th Nov 1914, which I think clearly has in mind the inner/outer framework: 'Ist in dem christliche Gotteserlebnis eine grundsätzliche und normative Stellungnahme zu den Erscheinungen des sozialen und nationalen Lebens enthalten, oder ist es indifferent für Gut und Böse, sobald die individuelle Verantwortlichkeit des Einzelnen zurücktritt? Soll der ethische Monismus Calvins gelten, oder der ethische Dualismus Luthers, Naumanns und Troeltschs?' (Karl Barth-Martin Rade: *ein Briefwechsel*, p 115.)

principle in Barth's theology is so deep-rooted, in that it can be traced back to the first months of his Safenwil pastorate.²⁸

In fact, I believe that the most essential principle in Barth's theology, from its early Safenwil phase to his latest writings, is to be found in his recognition of the immense power of the external forces of culture and history, specifically regarding the fact that they hold sway even over the individual who believes that he transcends them in his inward experience. I have given evidence for this from Barth's earliest writings and addresses; and here I would also draw attention to the following passage taken from the posthumously published fragment of the Dogmatics entitled *The Christian Life*:

World history, being the history of man and humanity, of Adamic humanity which has fallen from God, is also the history of innumerable absolutisms of different kinds, of forces that are truly and properly man's own but that have won a certain autonomy, independence and even superiority in relation to him. There they are, powerful enough in and in spite of their impotence to be too much for the one who can and should be their lord and [powerful enough] to take him to task, to master him who should master them, influencing, determining and controlling his thought and speech and also his purposes and enterprises for himself and in his common life with others... They are not just the supports but the motors of society. They are the secret guarantee of man's great and small conventions, customs, habits, traditions and institutions. They are the hidden wirepullers in man's great and small enterprises, movements, achievements, and revolutions. They are not just the potencies but the real factors and agents of human progress, regress and stagnation in politics, economics, scholarship, technology and art, and also of the evolutions and retardations in all the personal life of the individual. It is not really people who do things, whether leaders or the masses.

²⁸ cf Wilfried Härle, in his article entitled 'Der Aufruf der 93 Intellektuellen und Karl Barths Bruch mit der liberalen Theologie', p 220. Härle states that Barth's commitment to Liberal theology was already broken at this point, in 1911, when he (Barth) polemicised against a religion of pure inwardness. I believe McCormack is right that Härle has overstated his case (*Dialectical Theology*, p 79). On the other hand, I think that Härle was perhaps basically right to claim that the most important theological decisions were made in or around the year 1911; although I would disagree with his conclusion that the reaction of Barth's Liberal teachers to the war was not a decisive influence in his theological development. Härle may be right that Barth later overstated the impact of the public pro-war declaration which his Liberal teachers signed. But there is still plenty of evidence that their reaction to the war (which Barth knew of quite apart from their public declaration) exercised a decisive effect on his attitude towards Liberal (i.e. Marburg) theology (e.g., in Barth's letter to Herrmann dated 4th Nov 1914 - Karl Barth-Martin Rade: ein Briefwechsel, p 115; also Barth's letter to Thurneysen dated 4th Sept 1914 - *Revolutionary Theology*, p 26).

Through mankind's fault, things are invisibly done without and above man, even above the human individual in all his uniqueness, by the host of absolutisms, of powers that seek to be lordless and that make an impressive enough attempt to exhibit and present themselves as such.²⁹

Now, here in the final phase of Barth's great life work we find a very powerful statement of the principle of collective self-deception. This principle is that history is driven by concealed powers of sin which predetermine all external historical realities, and which extend also to the personal life and awareness of the individual. These are the social and

²⁹ Barth, *The Christian Life*, p 216 (emphasis mine). We can compare this directly with an excerpt from a 1913 sermon, cited by McCormack: 'Is humanity not like a person with a fever, tossed here and there by the powers of self-seeking, greed, pride and hatred? Are these not the powers which dictate the laws which govern our businesses, our political life, and our social life? And do we not all sense how these laws also govern our souls, how again and again we think and do those things which we know ought not to be?' (*Dialectical Theology*, p 95; *Predigten 1913*, p 68.) We may also take note of the following parallel between *The Christian Life* and *Predigten 1913*. In *The Christian Life*, Barth writes of 'Mammon, the lordless power of material resources that holds absolute sway over man...Money is a flexible but powerful instrument which, supposedly handled by man, in reality follows its own law. In a thousand ways it can establish some opinions and even convictions and suppress others. It can also create brutal facts. It can cause the market to rise and then to fall again...It can serve peace yet pursue cold war even in the midst of peace. It can make ready for a bloody war and bring it about. It can bring provisional paradise here and the corresponding provisional hell there...' (p 224). In *Predigten 1913* we read: 'Der Mammon...ist der Fürst, der alle Welt unter seinem Szepter hat...Er winkt, und die Geister erwachen, die Füße fangen an zu laufen, die Hände zu arbeiten, die Räder drehen sich, eine Welt kommt in Bewegung. Er winkt ab, und an die Stelle des Lebens tritt Totenstille. Er leitet die Entwicklung der Völker. Er befiehlt hier einen blutigen Krieg und verhindert dort einen andern.' (p 84.) The almost verbal parallel is very striking, and we can note also that in the 1913 sermons Barth expounded the concept of self-deceptive compromise in connection with 'Mammon' ('die Lüge, die Gott und dem Mammon miteinander dienen will...', *Predigten 1913*, p 31). Finally, we may take note of the following passage from Barth's account of the case of the communist East against the capitalist West in 'The Church between East and West' (1949; see my third chapter), pp 133-4: 'To whom do they all owe allegiance in the last resort - your papers and parties and unions from which you get your supposedly free opinions...? Where else but in the great banks are the wires pulled [die Drähte gezogen] on which you dance in your imagined freedom; who else but the banks decide in the last resort whether you are able to work or not, to earn or not to earn, and therefore to live or not to live? Is not any means good enough for you when you are carrying on your partly wilful, partly deluded fight for the dominion of this god of yours; any kind of war, and in peace-time any kind of civilised brutality and fraud, any machination...?' (Compare above, *The Christian Life*, p 216: 'They are the hidden wirepullers [Drahtzieher] (etc.).')

cultural forces for which man is ultimately responsible but from which he is no longer able to escape and of which he is, in most cases, no longer even conscious. This principle, which I believe to be the fundamental principle of Barth's theology, can be stated in two closely inter-related parts: first, the self-awareness of the individual is predetermined by trans-individual factors, which remain concealed from the individual's self-awareness; and second, these factors are what we would call sinful - that is, having their origin in human responsibility, in the various forms of human selfishness, and being ultimately destructive in their effect.

It may well be objected to this formulation that I have failed to do justice to Barth's determination to ground his theology on a theological or christological basis. This question cannot be answered comprehensively at this point, but in what follows I would like to give some indication of how we may approach the question; in particular, I think this question is directly related to the issue of Barth's development in his later writings towards a greater christological concentration. Specifically, it could be argued that I am abstracting Barth's earlier work and reading it into his later work. I will now take a more detailed look at this objection.

Objection: early and late Barth

The objection which may be raised against my presentation of Barth's theology can be formulated as follows. Although I have demonstrated a certain common thread in his counter-cultural attitude and concepts from his earliest to his latest writings, nevertheless surely there is a crucial difference which I have ignored, namely the development of Barth's christological concentration which is powerfully present in his later writings, but relatively muted in his earlier writings.

In response to this question, I think it would help us to grasp what is at stake here if I express it within the framework of the issue I have highlighted. What I mean is: it could be claimed that I have identified an important common thread in Barth's theology in terms of his counter-cultural criticism; however, what I have failed to see is that in his later theological development he came more and more to see that he could not rely on an angry

counter-cultural critique. He could not rely on only clearing away the debris. Instead, he recognised that if we are to have the confidence not to compromise or to establish a 'concordat' with the sinful reality of the world, then we must recognise that, prior to all our own efforts, Jesus Christ has the victory over the world. Hence, in Barth's later work he developed a more positive doctrine of Christ, and, in so far as this involved a focus on Christ's victory over the darkness rather than on the darkness itself, this ultimately led to a more positive understanding of the world and of culture in general.³⁰

For me, the basic question here is whether this apparent discontinuity (or substantive development) between his earlier and later theology weakens or even destroys the parallels I have cited from the different phases of his theology. It is my view that it does not, or at least does not do so necessarily. For even in the later works, when the positive reality of Christ's victory is perhaps emphasised more strongly, nevertheless it remains the case that Barth's understanding of what it means to claim Christ as Saviour is primarily shaped by his view of sin as self-deceptive compromise with the existing orders. I think this is apparent, for example, in the following passage from CD IV/2:

...[I]n this onslaught [directed against the world] it is a matter of God's destruction, accomplished in the existence of the Son of Man, of all the so-called "given factors," all the supposed natural orders, all the historical forces, with which the claim of absolute validity and worth have obtruded themselves as authorities...between God and man, but also between man and his fellows...When they are posited absolutely, possessions (which are significantly described as the "mammon of unrighteousness" in Lk. 16⁹) and worldly honour, the force which defends them, the family with its claims and even the law of

³⁰ e.g., we have noted that Barth writes of the compromise between the knowledge and ignorance of God in *The Christian Life*. But we should also note how in this connection he states: 'If as the living community of Jesus Christ and its living members we cannot escape a final profound disquiet in face of the fact of the juxtaposition of light and darkness which dominates our present, this is because the total and final sanctifying of the name of God and the removal of the juxtaposition has already been revealed to us by the Word...as something that has taken place already in the work of Jesus Christ. This sanctifying of the name of God that has already taken place perfectly in Jesus Christ...stands in our way, forbidding us to come to terms and be content with the desecration of God's name in our present, as without this veto we would want to do and might do...' (pp 164-5). See also Hunsinger, who contrasts Barth's counter-cultural criticism with that of Kierkegaard, evidently thinking that Kierkegaard's criticism is self-grounded and hence merely negative, whereas Barth's thought is characterised by a confidence in the victory of Christ over negative cultural forces (*How to Read Karl Barth*, pp 259-260, referring to CD IV/3, pp 120-1).

a religion (and worst of all a religion of revelation) are all gods which are first set up by man, which are then worshipped in practice and which finally dominate him...It is not men, or any one man, who can make the break with these given factors and orders and historical forces...It is the kingdom, the revolution of God which breaks them, which has already broken them. Jesus is their Conqueror.³¹

My point here is that, although Jesus is named as the one who alone is victorious over sin, nevertheless the specific meaning and content of this victory is defined in terms of Barth's distinctive insight as to what sin actually entails. It appears to me that this passage underlines rather than contradicts my basic thesis that Barth intended to restate the gospel in view of what I have called the hermeneutical dimension of sin, the latter being the problem that individual thought and action are overwhelmed by the sin concealed in the broader structures of history and society. I would say there is a direct and integral connection between Barth's statement here that '[i]t is not men, or any one man, who can make the break with these given factors and orders and historical forces' and his statement in the previous quotation concerning the 'lordless powers' that 'through mankind's fault, things are done invisibly without and above man, even above the individual in all his uniqueness...'. In both cases, what is at stake is humanity's helplessness in face of these trans-individual structures and forces. It is undeniably the case that Christ's saving reality and action cannot be deduced from the problem Barth is engaged with; but I myself think it equally undeniable that his understanding of Christ's saving action is at least decisively shaped through his engagement with this problem.

I also think it important to pursue how, immediately after the passage just quoted, Barth proceeds to draw out the practical consequences of Jesus' victory for Christian discipleship. For here again the distinction between inner and outer comes to the fore:

If we are disciples, we are necessarily witnesses of this fact [i.e. that Jesus is Conqueror]. We are awakened by Him from the dream that these forces are divine, or divinely given actualities, eternal orders...If we are His disciples, we are freed by Him from their rule...The world which sighs under these powers must hear and receive and rejoice that their lordship is broken. But this declaration cannot be made by the existence of those who are merely free inwardly...His disciples cannot be content with a mere theory about the relativisation of those false absolutes; a mere...inward freedom in relation to them...[I]t is a denial of the call to discipleship if they evade the achievement of acts

³¹ CD IV/2, pp 543-4.

and attitudes in which even externally and visibly they break free from these attachments.... There can be no question ... of a soaring and tranquillising mysticism of world-renunciation and freedom and conquest in which the obligation to the godless and hostile orders already broken in Christ is not only maintained but if anything validated and sanctified...No, it is important only as, in obedience to the One who demands it, it is an indication of His attack and victory...[The disciple of Jesus] must and will run the risk of being an offence to those around him - and in so far as he sees with their eyes, to himself...It is not a matter of saving his own soul in the attainment of a private beatitude. He loses his soul...if he will not accept the public responsibility which he assumes when he becomes a disciple of Jesus.³²

I have quoted this passage at length to demonstrate that Barth's dogmatic concept of the victory of Christ is inextricably linked to his earlier ideas, going back to 1913 and indeed earlier, when he protested against the interiorising and spiritualising of Christian faith as a covert legitimisation of existing 'external' orders. We can even see a direct parallel with the sermon of 1913, quoted above (i.e. 'so long as I save my soul in this evil world').³³ It cannot be denied that there are considerable developments in dogmatic conceptuality between the sermons of 1913 and CD IV/2 about forty years later. Nevertheless, I would propose that even in the later work the truly vital element, which gives content and direction to his Christ-centred soteriology, is structurally continuous with the socio-political criticism found in his earlier work.

Further Reflections on the development of Barth's Theology: his development away from socialism

It would rightly be said that any such claim about Barth's theology must also take into account the fact that at some point he began explicitly to distance himself from the religious socialist movement and also from socialism as such. But, in spite of this factor, I would still maintain that Barth's later developments remained dependent on the influence of socialism on his early thought. In fact, Barth's movement away from socialism can be seen - paradoxically - as a more radical application of the fundamental principle of socialism as he understood it.

³² CD IV/2, pp 544-5 (emphasis mine).

³³ Predigten 1913, p 72. The original German is, respectively: 'Wenn ich nur meine Seele rette in der bösen Welt' and 'Es geht ja für ihn nicht darum, in Erwerbung eines Privaten Heils seine Seele zu retten.'

I think that what Barth learned from socialism in general and from religious socialism in particular was this: the existing orders of state and society can perpetuate themselves by deceiving the populace of their 'practical necessity'. In this way, people at varying levels become persuaded that the existing orders simply cannot be changed; that the reformation or revolution of existing conditions might be desirable in theory but not achievable in practice. The value of socialism was that it challenged such assumptions about this deceptively maintained distinction between theory and practice.³⁴

However, Barth's problem was that both secular social democracy and religious socialism themselves had a tendency to stop short of their own better principles and to succumb to a pragmatic spirit - that is, they also tended to behave as if there were an ultimate distinction between theory and practice, and accordingly to make illegitimate compromises with the existing orders. Barth argued that although one must admittedly make distinctions between what one would like to achieve in theory and what one is able to achieve in practice, nevertheless this distinction must never be treated as normal or as

³⁴ I am not certain if Barth learnt the suspicion of the terms 'theory and practice' from the religious socialists, although I am certain that the concept is clearly visible (for example) in Hermann Kutter's pioneering work *They Must* - and, as previously noted, the concept is expressed by Kutter in terms of the parallel 'inner/outer' distinction. In any case, we find that in 1912 Barth used a criticism of a deceptive theory/practice distinction in defence of socialism as such - which shows that Barth did understand socialism as challenging the standard theory/practice distinction. The relevant passage is found in Barth's open letter to Herr Hüsey, a capitalist entrepreneur who had written an open letter to Barth in criticism of a socialist speech, and the following is the relevant part of Barth's reply: 'Zum Schluß noch ein Wort über Ihre Phrase, daß zwischen Theorie und Praxis ein Unterschied bestehe... Sie wollen damit sagen, daß man die Praxis mit der Theorie möglichst ungeschoren lassen solle. Dieser Wunsch ist in Ihrem Munde höchst begreiflich. Wie Sie mit der Praxis meinen, das ist der Privatnutzen, und was ich mit der Theorie meine, das ist die Gerechtigkeit. Sie tun sehr klug daran, dem Privatnutzen die Gerechtigkeit möglichst vom Leibe zu halten und gewisse fatale Bibelsprüche als "alt und deshalb nicht mehr zeitgemäß" zu erklären. Aber wir wollen es abwarten, wessen Licht länger brennt, dasjenige Ihrer Klugheit, die die Theorie von der Praxis trennt, oder dasjenige des Sozialismus und der Bibel, die an die Stelle des Privatnutzens die Gerechtigkeit setzen.' (Karl Barth, 'Antwort auf den offenen Brief des Herrn W. Hüsey in Aarburg' in Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten, 1909-1914* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1993), 416 (411-417).) Also of interest here is the way Barth relates the distinction between theory and practice to making the distinction between the Bible's own time and what is relevant for today (see further below).

ultimate. Put another way, one must never grow accustomed to the distinction between theory and practice. For this has the effect of blunting the sharp edge of protest against the existing order, and it was its tendency in this direction which made Barth dissatisfied with socialism as he encountered it. According to Barth, one must never lose the sense of tension, contradiction even, between what one would like to achieve in theory and what one is able to achieve in practice. One must never, so to speak, trim the ideal to fit the reality.³⁵

Now, I believe that it was this issue which was in the background of Barth's insistence that the action of God must never be identified with any human action; this sense of tension, amounting almost to contradiction, reflects Barth's sense of how one must always maintain the sense of tension between the ideal (here the 'eternal', 'infinite' or the action

³⁵ See Barth's critique of religious socialism represented by *Die Hilfe* (journal edited by F.Naumann), in 1914: '[A] politics which raises the necessary concessions and compromises to the dignity of generally valid ultimate ideas is very different from a politics which, to be sure, also makes concessions and compromises for the sake of immediate goals...but in doing so, constantly makes it known: these are provisionalities for which we do not for a moment have any enthusiasm...It is one thing to become accustomed to the world of relativities, finally becoming completely satisfied and ...at home in them, as those who have no hope. It is another thing altogether, in the midst of this world of relativities, to be incessantly disquieted and full of longing, fundamentally revolutionary vis-à-vis that which exists.' (Cited McCormack, *Dialectical Theology*, pp 108-9, referring to 'Die Hilfe 1913', *Die Christliche Welt* 28 (15 Aug 1914), p 776 (774-8).) Also note Barth's letter to Thurneysen in 1914, regarding the Social Democrats: 'Perhaps it will interest you to know what I had to say to the Social Democrats in Küngoldingen yesterday. In the discussion one man said very pleasantly that what I had described to them was indeed the mind of Jesus and his disciples, but did I not know of another, easier way for them in view of the imperfection of the world and of humanity?! A trade-unionist instructed me concerning the impossibility of "waiting" and the necessity of the proletarian battle!! Our difficulty in addressing the Social Democrats became clear to me once more: either one strengthens them in their party loyalty by providing a religious foundation...or one tries to lead them out beyond themselves and thereby...one lays upon them a burden which is too heavy for many of them to bear. In spite of everything, the latter is the right thing to do...' (*Revolutionary Theology*, p 27 - letter dated 7th December 1914; cf CD I/1, pp 72-5.) Finally, we should take note of the following passage from several years later, in 1922, where Barth is writing of dreams of an ideal, Utopian future: 'Happy he at least who gives himself no illusions over his own ability to realize what he sees there, who does not underestimate the distances, falsify the high words, and in order to fit the ideal to his limited possibilities trim and shorten it... Happy, in a word, the man who at least goes down with colors flying, without capitulation or compromise, true to himself and to what he desires!' ('The Problem of Ethics Today', pp 162-3 - emphases mine.)

of God himself) and what humans are able to achieve in practice. I mention this especially because Jüngel draws attention to Barth's term the 'revolution of God' which according to Barth must not be identified with any human action. Jüngel uses this fact to argue that Barth had thereby distanced himself from a political or socialist emphasis in theology; but if my suggestion is right, that Barth's usage here is determined by a more radical application of what he had learned from socialism, then this may mean that Barth's theocentric emphasis is more closely related to his socialist involvement than Jüngel recognised.³⁶

It needs to be said that these reflections are very far from a comprehensive summary of the problems associated with Barth's theological development. But for me they provide a clear indication of how his later developments may be more firmly rooted in his socialist beginnings than is immediately evident. I will leave this question now and draw this thesis to a close by summing up what we have learned with regard to our original question, namely the question of Barth's 'unnatural' exegesis.

Conclusion: 'the unholy doctrine of theory and practice'

In my view, highlighting the problems of Barth's unnatural exegesis has enabled us to bring certain questions into focus. In the first place, it has meant that we cannot pass over the question of whether his exegetical conclusions and the theology based on them are actually grounded in the scriptural passages themselves. Indeed, I believe that as a condition of serious scholarship we have to begin at the point where we admit that Barth's theology is not based on the texts in question, and conversely that he does in fact read his

³⁶ E.Jüngel, 'Barth's Theological Beginnings', in Karl Barth: a Theological Legacy, p 101 (53-104), referring to the 1st edition of Romans: 'It is clear that Barth's use of the political metaphor of the "revolution of God" as just a metaphor, was consciously intended to obliterate its political Sitz im Leben. This is most clearly expressed in his subsequent use of the metaphor against itself, when he asserts that the revolution of God is "also a revolution against what is today called revolution."' I would argue that the tension between the revolution of God and human revolution (viz. humanly practicable revolution) has its background in Barth's understanding of the need to maintain a radical tension (as opposed to an accepted or comfortable distinction) between theory and practice or between the ideal and the real in the political arena. That is, the background to the 'revolution against what is today called revolution' is the radical rejection of any 'realistic' or 'practical' compromises with or capitulations to the existing order.

theological presuppositions into the texts. And, as I stated provisionally in my first chapter, I think that this difficulty has forced us to consider the relationship between what has been called Barth's theological exegesis and what would reasonably count as exegetical objectivity.

As I also explained in my opening chapter, I find it in principle inadequate simply to use a study of Barth's exegesis to highlight the prior theological commitments or dogmatic interest which are presupposed in his exegesis. For, assuming we understand objectivity in the normal sense as a critical distancing from subjective presuppositions, then it appears inescapable that for as long as we claim Barth's exegesis is determined by a theological or dogmatic interest, then it will not be possible to show how his exegesis is related to anything we would recognise as 'objective' or 'critical' in this sense. It is necessary to acknowledge this if his oft-quoted slogan 'more critical than the critics' is to be anything more than a slogan. If we do not recognise this, we will be severing his exegesis not only from the hidden assumptions of critical exegesis, but also from a hermeneutically informed exegesis which is profoundly aware of the danger of hidden assumptions. For it is impossible to engage seriously in hermeneutically informed exegesis if our dogmatic or theological presuppositions are fixed in advance. As I indicated in my opening chapter, it is tempting to exculpate Barth on the grounds that only according to a procedure such as his would we be able to maintain a vital connection between scriptural exegesis and contemporary faith or preaching. And yet such an approach will only function for as long as we fail to notice the glaring difference, indeed contradiction, between a critical awareness of presuppositions on the one hand and a prior, unalterable fixing of dogmatic presuppositions on the other.

Others who have held to my position on this have normally repudiated Barth as an exegete and theologian, and those who have not held this position have seen it as Barth's strength (or at least an unavoidable fact) that his thinking is ultimately incommensurable with generally accessible exegesis and hermeneutics. My approach has been to undertake the perilous experiment of tracing Barth's dogmatic presuppositions back to a principle which

is in fact commensurable with critically and hermeneutically conscious exegesis and biblical interpretation. This principle, which I believe underlies even his dogmatic presuppositions, concerns the impact of corporate or cultural self-deception on the immediate awareness of human beings. More specifically, this means that Barth opposes the construction of a realm of 'theory' or of the 'inner life' which can be demarcated and fenced off from the practicalities of the 'external' world. For there is no such realm of inwardness, no such theoretical or ideal realm which is free from the impact of the external factors of society and history. It is those who believe in such a sphere of inwardness or 'inward freedom' who are thereby most strongly enslaved to these varied and insidious external factors.

We have followed Burnett's argument that Barth's hermeneutics is a protest against the empathetic tradition, derived from Schleiermacher and prior to him, from Lessing, with its emphasis on the structured distinction between inner and outer (or inward subjectivity and external objectifications). I would claim that I have taken Burnett's argument further and traced the origin of Barth's hermeneutics back to his suspicion of the political function of the inner/outer distinction, that is, to his protest against the way this distinction functions to legitimate the existing social and political orders. My view is that, because of his suspicion of the way this inner/outer distinction functions in the political sphere, Barth acquired a corresponding suspicion of the distinction between inner and outer as it operates in scriptural interpretation (or, more generally, in historical understanding and hermeneutics). In my fifth chapter we looked in detail at how the distinction between inner and outer corresponds to the distinction between spirit and letter in Liberal and romantic hermeneutics. And the corresponding distinction between theory and practice, which we examined most especially in my fourth chapter, corresponds to the distinction between what the author meant in his own time and what he means for today, or, alternatively, to the distinction between our theoretical reflection on the biblical text and our practical application of it. I propose that Barth's opposition to all such distinctions can be traced back to his protest against their political function or implications.

With reference to the last point (viz. theory and practice), we may recall my analysis of Barth's 'three stages' of biblical exegesis, namely observation, reflection and application.

In summing up his analysis of the three stages of exegesis in CD I/2, Barth writes as follows:

If [the biblical text] is envisaged only as a so-called theory into which our practice has to breathe the necessary life, it has not been properly seen at all. And our observation and reflection on Scripture have been not merely useless but false. False scriptural exegesis at the two first stages usually betrays itself and is avenged at the third stage in the fact that our attitude to Scripture now assumes the dualistic form of this unholy doctrine of “theory and practice” ...³⁷

Now I would argue that the background to this comment is Barth’s concern over the way that the distinction between theory and practice functions in the political sphere in legitimating the existing orders. The consequence of this is that we need to have a very carefully nuanced understanding of Barth’s apparent turn from politics to a scripturally based theology. For Barth’s turn towards Scripture was not what we would normally understand as such; it was not a decision to be concerned with Scripture in itself and as such.³⁸ It was, rather, a protest against the existing order and against the way that Scripture, through apparently sophisticated critical interpretations, becomes assimilated to the pragmatic assumptions of contemporary culture. As I put this in my fourth chapter, Barth was not motivated by an exalted view of the biblical text, but rather by a radical suspicion of the contemporary world view. The question is how it is possible for Scripture to speak a word to us which is not simply assimilated to the framework of deceptively self-evident assumptions which constitute our culture and which subversively determine all our thought and feeling, our theorising and our ‘inner life’.

I will close now with some comments on possible directions for further research along the lines indicated in this thesis.

³⁷ CD I/2, p 737.

³⁸ On Barth’s ‘turn to the Scripture’, see E.Jüngel, ‘Barth’s Theological Beginnings’, p 94, where Jüngel cites Barth’s comment to Thurneysen, ‘If only we had been converted to the Bible earlier, so that we would now have solid ground under our feet!’ (See *Revolutionary Theology*, p 45.) Jüngel clearly sees this as further evidence for Barth’s turn from politics to a strictly theological basis, but, as I hope is clear, I regard this as a false antithesis in that Barth’s primary intention is to protest against the framework of contemporary cultural presuppositions, and the way Scripture is incorporated into them.

First of all, I would say that I am very much aware that there are certain overarching themes in Barth's theology which, whilst very prominent in his theology, nevertheless have not been directly addressed in the present thesis. These would need to be addressed if my overall approach to Barth's theology were to be more thoroughly substantiated. Especially I have in mind scholastic themes such as his adoption of Chalcedonian christology and his Trinitarianism. However, this is beyond the scope of the present thesis, which has focused on Barth's doctrine of Scripture and on the theological issues which have arisen immediately from our examination of this doctrine.³⁹

Secondly, I believe that Barth scholarship should adopt a more differentiated and historically contextualised understanding of Barth's negative statements on the use of philosophical or hermeneutical principles in theology. For, in my view, Barth's negative

³⁹ As a brief example of how I might advance the argument beyond the scope of this thesis: I would admit that the Trinitarian aspect of Barth's thought is clearly essential to the architecture of Barth's Dogmatics, although I would still question the extent to which Trinitarianism belongs to the essence of his thought and development. Bearing in mind that my approach to Barth's theology has focused on the issue of the trans-individual structures of sin which predetermine human subjectivity, I would point to the following passage as my starting point for showing how my approach would apply to his Trinitarianism: 'It is hard to see how the distinction of the mode of being of the Son of God from that of the Father - and the same must be said of the Holy Spirit - can be denied without speculatively changing and weakening the seriousness of God's wrath against sin, of the opposition between original man and fallen man, of the world of creation and our world of sin and death, into a mere tension within a totality which is known to us and can be surveyed by us... Thus Schleiermacher regarded sin quantitatively as a mere lack, and he then logically viewed reconciliation... as the crowning of creation, and again, consistently, he interpreted the Trinity modalistically... It may also be said conversely that such disasters will inevitably happen in the doctrine of creation and reconciliation if the necessary safeguards are not provided by a sound doctrine of the Trinity.' (CD I/1, p 410 - emphasis mine.) Here, at what I would claim is a pivotal point in the construction of the Trinitarian basis of the Dogmatics, Barth is clearly concerned with the impact of sin on the standpoint of the 'knowing subject'. His intention is that the rupture caused by sin should not be regarded as a mere tension within an unbroken totality accessible to human consciousness; and hence, by implication, his view is that sin precedes and transcends human consciousness. For this and other reasons, I would suggest that the development of Barth's Trinitarian thought was subordinate to his primary intention of incorporating within Christian theology the principle of the trans-individual and trans-subjective dimension of sin - the principle that 'through mankind's fault, things are invisibly done without and above man, even above the human individual in all his uniqueness, by the host of absolutisms, of powers that seek to be lordless...' (The Christian Life, p 216. - quoted above).

statements were not directed against all that could be understood as philosophical or hermeneutical principles; in their context, such statements were directed specifically against the Cartesian-Romantic nexus of thought which prevailed within the philosophy preceding his time and which he believed was being extended into the existentialist philosophy of his own time. Conversely, and positively, I believe Barth's theology can and should be understood as an attempt to revise and reinterpret Christian theology and faith in terms of an identifiable hermeneutical or philosophical principle - namely, the impact of corporate self-deception on immediate consciousness and perception.

Finally, I would say that if my general thesis were substantiated or accepted, then I believe it would have a significant contribution to make to the urgent and vexed question of how we may, without anachronism, appropriate Barth's theology for many contemporary issues and controversies. I hope it is broadly evident that if Barth's most fundamental concern was with the impact of self-deception on people's immediate consciousness and self-awareness, then this brings his thought much closer to the hermeneutical concerns of much of contemporary thought. It is my tentative hope that the general position advocated in this thesis would go some way towards healing the rift which I believe exists, and exists unnecessarily, between the best of Barth studies and so much that is positive and constructive in the broader field of contemporary scholarship.

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